

Employment of Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

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Abstract

Societies are faced with paradigm shift in disability issues from institutionalisation to inclusion. Industries are shifting to the fourth industrial revolution. Long standing patriarchal societies are into gender equality. In the midst of all these revolutions is the woman with disabilities considered in employment which is a tool to economic empowerment? Employment is a key activity of adulthood that is crucial to independence. However, disability and gender can result in limited access to the open labor market and consequently less participation. While the employment of people with disabilities has received considerable attention in labor legislation and supporting documents, there is a dearth of empirical research on the development of disability employment policies and their effectiveness in developing countries. Hence people with disabilities especially women still suffer exclusionary inclusion in work and work-related sectors. The study seeks to unveil whether the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) mitigates or exacerbates the challenges faced by the women with disabilities in accessing and keeping employment in Zimbabwe. The study was delimited to Bulawayo Metropolitan Province of Zimbabwe. 15 women with various disabilities both employed and unemployed were purposively sampled as respondents for the study. Semi structured interview schedules and observations were the tools for data gathering. The study was underpinned on the Critical Disability Theory (CDT) of Max Horkeirmer and the Feminist theory. The study revealed a lack of inclusion and highlighted discrimination rendered at schools or in educational institutions as holding back women with disabilities in the transition from school to industry especially in this hype of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Physical barriers or inaccessible environments were highlighted among the challenges. Societal negative attitudes to people with disabilities, were picked as an attitudinal barrier for women with disabilities to excel in employment. Culture issues, gender roles and feminine issues also press the women down. For the purpose of this study women and girls will be put in one umbrella as employment of

women with disabilities is interlinked to the upbringing and education of girls with disabilities.

Keywords

Disability, Gender, Discrimination, Fourth Industrial Revolution, Feminism

1. Background to the Study

Society is in the throngs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, combining the physical, digital and biological realms to create exponential change at a high rate and enormous scale. Many aspects of our lives are changing and gender specific roles may change along it. With the Fourth Industrial Revolution presenting both immense opportunities and challenges, it's up to all of us to work together to ensure that it benefits everyone, including women with disabilities. Discrimination is a long existing phenomenon in human society. It is the unfair or unequal treatment imposed to certain groups or members belonging to a unit. Gender discrimination is caused by gender differences, and it may exist in each area of the society all over the world, which handicaps the political, economic, social and cultural rights of women. On the other hand, throughout history, the problem for people with disabilities has not been a lack of integration, but rather, an unfulfilled form of integration, with limited possibilities for education, work and social life (Cheshire, 2014). People with disabilities have always had a place in society, but a place that the misconceptions of the leaders of the community and the community itself prescribed for them, thus discrimination.

It appears like the rate of unemployment for women with disabilities in Zimbabwe has reached alarming proportions. This is evidenced by the rising number of women with disabilities on the streets begging as well as others roaming the streets or just seated at home. Others do have very good qualifications but cannot secure employment in the job market, and the question is: Is the fourth industrial revolution relieving or worsening the situation? The "fourth industrial Revolution" is an expression popularised by Klaus Schwab and used to refer to the current wave of converging how materials are produced, how manufacturing is done and how research is being done (Dimitrieska, Stankovaska, Efremova 2018). It is a way of describing the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds. A critical inquiry is urgently needed to gauge what effects the fourth industrial revolution is having and will have on vulnerable, marginalized populations. Will it assist as an enabler of gender equality or an accelerator of gendered disparities, is it further marginalizing the disabled or including them in the mainstream societies of developing countries like Zimbabwe?

Throughout the world and for much of history, women have had dual roles as income generators (workers) and wives/mothers/caregivers, while men have largely functioned as income generators. Although women's representation in

the workforce has increased dramatically over the past 30 years, they continue to assume most of the family and household responsibilities. Even in the developed world where gender roles in the household have evolved over several decades, significant inequality remains. This duality in women's lives has resulted in gender inequality, not only in the household and the social position, but also in the labour market and general well-being (Russo & Jansen, 1988; ILO, 2010). The age of enlightenment has led to a growing educational focus, but while the general concern of the society is on work and production especially in the fourth industrial revolution, women with disabilities are not yet regarded as able to continue industrial production. They are still, to a large extent, deprived of the role of worker, and thereby also deprived of the possibility of obtaining a reasonable status in society. To a larger extent, women with disabilities are still viewed as subject of protection by a liberal and progressive society, with the control lying within that society.

Throughout the world, women with disabilities are less likely to be referred for vocational training, are more likely to remain unemployed or work in part time menial jobs (ILO, 2010). Probably, this is because of persistent social norms ascribing gender roles, which are often, slow to change. Despite some progress made over the last few decades in increasing women's labor force participation and narrowing gender gaps in wages, gender equality in Zimbabwe in the area of work or employment opportunities still remains an elusive goal. There could be many reasons for such serious employment discrimination against women with disabilities, such as historical factors, cultural relativism, economic calculations and weak legal system. Women are still grossly underrepresented in the industry and commerce circles. This could be due to women's socio-economic disadvantages caused by gender-based discrimination and their double roles of being a worker and a care taker for the society. Furthermore, women continue to undertake most of unpaid care work, which has become an increasing challenge in their efforts to engage in productive work, in the highly active market economy of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

According to the Gender Industry Report 2016, WEF (World Economic Forum, 2016), the burden of job losses resulting from automation and mediation as a result of the 4th Industrial Revolution will affect 48% of women and 52% of men. However, the fact that women make up a smaller proportion of the labor force means that the current economic gap between the sexes may be even more widespread than the current 40%. Extending the gender gap can be explained by the fact that many of the jobs that are automated are mostly women's jobs, but also because women are under-represented in the STEM sciences, which are expected to have the greatest growth over the next five years.

Women with disabilities are regarded as inadequate because of their disability on the other hand expected to fulfil the gender roles ascribed by the society. Women, especially those with blindness often have less access to productive resources, education, skills development and labour market opportunities than men in many societies in Zimbabwe. Promoting gender equality in employment

is an important cornerstone to advance women's economic empowerment in Africa and elsewhere. Thus, the elimination of gender inequality in the labour market is a central goal of developing and developed countries alike, and one of the key objectives of development strategies that can be used to reduce poverty while achieving economic growth with equity. According to the study by Hershey and Stephens 1995 in (Munemo & Tom, 2013) poverty and lack of economic opportunities were identified as major barriers to women with disabilities' empowerment. Thus a life-cycle and rights-based approach has to be promoted in promoting decent and productive employment and income opportunities equally for every person, women and men disabled or non-disabled. Generally there is limited research focus on how disability effects can be reduced through technology in Zimbabwe which is probably a result of the government's attention being diverted to economic recovery, empowerment, emerging social problems of HIV/AIDS, cancer, and marauding poverty and of late the corona virus (COVID 19).

2. Overview on Employment of Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe

According to UNESCO (2019), Persons with disabilities are a key constituency in Zimbabwe and are estimated to make up 7% of the population; however, they remain invisible in all levels of society and face numerous challenges in accessing healthcare, jobs, education, and justice. Moreover, women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination due to their marginalized gender. Zimbabwe is a member of the United Nations and has agreed to recognize the rights of People with Disabilities (PWD) through the declarations passed by the United Nations Human Rights including the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Other declarations passed include; The International Year of the Disabled Persons of 1981 which emphasized the rights of people with disabilities and the Standard Rules on Equalizations of Opportunities of 1993. The rules enforced states to make a strong moral and political commitment to take action on equalization of opportunities for people with disabilities. The aim of the rule was to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities through full participation, which is inclusion (United Nations Enables, 2012).

The Salamanca Statement of 1994 reiterated the right of education of every individual as stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is also laid out basic policy changes needed to promote inclusive education, so that schools can serve all children, particularly those with disabilities. The Salamanca Framework for Action distinctively excludes the established of special schools which exclude children with disabilities from the society and promotes the philosophy of inclusion based on the human rights model. It strongly points out that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other disabilities (Chireshe, 2013).

Legislation in favour of PWD in Zimbabwe predates the new millennium, except the 2013 Constitution. These include the Disabled Persons Act [Chapter 17:01] 1992, the Social Welfare Assistance Act [Chapter 17:06] 1988, the Education Act [Chapter 25:04] 2005, and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] 2004. As most of these legislations have no or little to offer in terms of human rights and many activists for the rights of PWDs have called for their repeal (Mugumbate, 2016). In particular, the DPA is criticised for using degrading terms such as “intellectually handicapped”, “imbecile,” “mentally disordered,” and “mental patients” which belittle, demean, devalue, and stigmatise PWDs (Manatsa, 2015).

The Zimbabwe Constitution is hailed for its potential to regard the rights of PWD as inalienable, interdependent, universal, and indivisible. It contains provisions that directly address disability; such as Sections 22 and 83 which call upon the government and its agencies to take appropriate measures to recognise the rights of PWD. Zimbabwe was hailed for being the first country in Southern Africa to design a disability law, namely the Disability Persons Act (DPA) of 1992. The Act was promulgated to advance PWD issues in Zimbabwe, yet it failed in aiding them to access basic needs and services including education, employment, and other crucial opportunities (Dziva, 2018).

According to a study by NASCOH (2013), in Zimbabwe, unemployment levels were above 80% for PWD and only a paltry 2% - 7% of PWD in formal employment. High unemployment rates of PWD are largely rooted in limited skills and qualifications. In few cases, where PWDs have qualifications and skills to compete for jobs on the market, additional challenges come into play to deny them such opportunities. Mizunoya & Mitra (2013), cite that PWDs face a confluence of attitudinal barriers, discriminatory laws, and inaccessible work environments that frustrate or discourage them. In the face of challenges of unemployment, PWD turn to begging or vending for survival (Groce et al., 2011). Nearly 80% of economically active PWD in the Global South rely much on self-employment, which is hazardous, insecure, and without welfare benefits (Groce et al., 2011). Women with Disabilities venturing into vending and begging often find an unpleasant and uneven environment that prevents them from being successful. WWD vendors face abuse, and various forms of discrimination (Dziva, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, the largest employer, Public Service Commission (PSC), employs mentally and physically fit persons. This is stated under Section 8 of its Regulations (2000) which states that everyone can be appointed: “*Unless he has been examined by a medical practitioner and certified, to the satisfaction of the secretary for health, to be free from any mental, or physical deficiency or infirmity likely to interfere with the efficient performance of his duties or render necessary his retirement before pensionable age.*” This clause excludes a majority of PWD in Zimbabwe from seeking employment in government institutions, and this study invokes the minds of WWD to reveal how they have been denied

employment opportunities in government, courtesy of this provision.

3. Objectives of the Study

The major thrust of this study is to:

- Inform on challenges faced by women with disabilities, in accessing employment and control of economy in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- Inform on the untapped benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in accessing employment to for the women with disabilities.
- Determine the strengths, weaknesses and potentials of the disability laws and policies in the area of employment of women with disabilities and thereby weighing possible ways of their improvement.
- Challenge the governments and DPOs to assist women with disabilities to access education and training in line with the fourth industrial revolution so to access employment.

4. Methodology

The qualitative approach and the phenomenology design were employed to collect data for the study. Polit and Beck (2014) define a qualitative research approach as an investigation of phenomena typically in an in-depth and holistic manner, through the collection of rich narrative materials using flexible data collection methods. This approach was selected to elicit data for the study because of its principles and interest on studying life as it is lived in real situations. The approach was considered the best for managing topics, like this one, where the study sought to explore the lived experiences of inclusion, marginalization, and exclusion of women with disabilities in employment in the fourth industrial revolution. Phenomenology attempts to unearth possible insights regarding the world as it is immediately experienced. Phenomenological research design is regarded as the most suitable design to collect data with the aim of gaining clear, first-hand information with no assumptions (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio 2019).

5. Theoretical Frameworks

This paper has been influenced by Critical Disability Theory and the Feminist theories. The critical social theory first outlined by Max Horkheimer. Emerging from the activism of people with disabilities in the 1970s, it challenges approaches that pathologize physical, mental and sensory difference as being in need of correction, and instead advocates for both accommodation and equality for people with disabilities in all areas of life. Critical disability studies seek to change conventional notions of people with disabilities as pitiable, tragic victims who should adjust to the world around them (Horkheimer, 1972). This charity model is criticized for providing badly needed services without engaging the underlying causes of social exclusion. Barriers to education, employment, transportation and a host of services, both public and private, all come under the

scrutiny of critical disability studies, a field that works toward universal accessibility. This theory seek to identify the sources of oppression within the law and legal institutions and, by means of that exposure, seeks to relieve people with disabilities from that oppression and to identify the potential positive role of law and seeks to create law, use existing law and enlist legal institutions in the struggle for the emancipation of people with disabilities (Hosking, 2008). To remedy this theoretical gap, the lens of **feminist theory** was overlaid on the lens of **critical disability theory**. This overlay had the potential to illumine normative constructs of gender that may be negatively limiting or reducing complex issues of identity and ontology for women with disabilities (Alaimo, 2008; Hekman, 2008). In addition, this overlay also worked to address the extant gap in feminist articulations on the body. Feminist theories deal with patriarchal ideology so as to challenge it. It seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education, employment, property and voting. It is an attempt to understand woman from the woman's point of view, to discover her strength and capacity, and to prove that she is not inferior to man (Ruthven, 2010).

6. General Features of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The Fourth Industrial revolution is not just about change in production of products and human consumption or services, but a collective force behind many products and services and also;

- changes social landscapes and how society works and relate to one another.
- promotes, innovation, industrialization and research.
- leverages the digital technologies.
- eliminates barriers to learning and production.
- enhances learning and teaching methods in educational institutions.
- allows greater flexibility in production and greater product customization.
- provides a technologically augmented reality.

7. Findings and Discussion

It emerged from this study that acceptance and full participation of women with disabilities in employment sectors was still a dream yet to be realized for many in Bulawayo province of Zimbabwe regardless the digital world presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The participants perceived the society as having negative attitudes towards women with disabilities. These negative attitudes were a result of how disability is still viewed by most people. The study revealed that myths and misconceptions about causes of disabilities still hang in most communities of Bulawayo hence the negative attitudes. This issue of discrimination of the people with disabilities came out eminently although with different degrees from different individuals. The communities and families regarded people with disabilities not as "full" human beings. At some places they would try to hide the member with a disability or want to represent her and answer questions on her behalf.

The study found out that some people regard disability as some form of contagious disease that the rest of the community was afraid to come in contact with hence reducing the chances of women with visual impairment of accessing employment. A respondent revealed that to start with, most of her family members did not understand that she is a full human being that needed to work like anyone else. Another respondent revealed that some employer asked if she did not have the family to look after her why take the trouble to search for employment. *“I wonder why a grown up woman like me should be provided for by the family when my mates work and provide for the families”*, was the sentiment of a visibly disturbed woman.

The study also shed light that most people still treated disability as a curse, contagious disease or a fate for the evil. The interviewed women said many times people would avoid them at all costs or pretend to be kind when in actual fact avoiding them. Another respondent said she sensed the uneasiness of the prospective employers the moment they discovered that she was blind. *“I am now used to it that people treat me with uncalled for care which is possible a result of fear of contaminating with the disability at times the employers are open but the issue will be with workmates treating us like we have some contagious disease”*. This was a statement from one for the respondents.

The study revealed serious imbalances in educational systems, women with disabilities in Bulawayo Province lack proper education as a means of empowerment and gateway to employment. This was evident first and foremost by the average levels of education of the respondents, with most of them not having education beyond primary school. Most respondents cited lack of special schools and inadequate specialized devices in mainstream schools for people living with disabilities. The 4IR is an era of devices, most activities that were previously done manually can now be done simple and faster with technology thus giving a second chance for people with disabilities. According to [Chataika \(2010\)](#), Education is widely regarded as key to unlocking opportunities for People with disabilities, especially girls. Indeed, education is both a fundamental right norm to girls with disabilities, and a means for achieving other rights. Despite its importance, children with disabilities find it difficult to access education in most parts of the Zimbabwe.

Lack of adequate education for women living with disabilities was identified as a barrier for women with visual impairment to access quality employment. This response was given as top priority for almost all respondents interviewed. Only 2 respondents said that they were largely satisfied with their life mainly because they have jobs and could provide for their families. *“I am working like any other people without disabilities, thanks to technology because it really makes life easier for me at work, I don't think that my disability or gender is making me so special or different from other people it's just like being short, tall, fat or slim coming with its shortcomings and advantages to an individual.”* The above was a view from a respondent who was even observed to be controlling her environment at workplace. The respondent appreciated technology thus it goes without

saying that the benefits of the 4IR if correctly integrated can increase participation and livelihood of women with disabilities.

The study revealed that most women with disabilities in Bulawayo province were discriminated against on grounds of culture and cultural values. This was evident by some responses from respondents that not only her disability prevented her from getting a job of her choice but also the fact that she is a woman in a patriarchal society. *“Not only my disability is affecting me from getting a job which has always been my dream profession from childhood but also the fact that I am a woman, with men it is better because they are let free by the families hence giving them better opportunities to explore in life”*. Oppressive social milieu that is, society’s attitudes that emanate from culture, beliefs, values and knowledge base were found to be the core in holding the women with disabilities from excelling in employment and economical influence.

Culture plays a big role on a person’s self-identity when it comes to where they belong and the things that define them as a person. Extra attention needs to be given to women with disabilities so that they have the opportunity to learn more about themselves and what is important to them (Smith & Twoney 2002). Thus culture should not be used as a tool to oppress other groups of the society but a unifying tool that give equal opportunities to all. Community leaders should also be sensitive to some cultural values that do not bring much value to the people but further oppress the weaker members of the communities. The findings are in support of Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki (2014), who found out that in traditional society, girls are paid less attention and not seen as potential citizens, while boys are given priority with regard to access to education, as well as more opportunities within the family and other privileges. Culture should be dynamic for it to be relevant from generation to generation.

Colleagues sometimes do not share information with people with disabilities because of the myths and beliefs around disability, thus compromising the ability of women with disabilities to perform their job or even to get one. Most respondents complained that they were often rejected in regular schools. Women said that the government had not done much in ensuring that Zimbabweans have an equal opportunity in all areas, discrimination has made women with disabilities to be more vulnerable. Therefore the DPO’s have the responsibility of coming up with workable strategies that will encourage women with disabilities to participant in employment. These findings are in support of Russo and Jansen (1988) who postulate that the combined effects of gender and disability stereotyping track women with disabilities into the most traditional female roles. Rigid gender roles compounded by the stigma of disability devalue the importance of education for girls with disabilities. The study also confirms the view by Vedeler, (2014), who notes that obstacles or barriers are areas like people’s attitudes toward people with disabilities, lack of knowledge among service providers, educational institutions, parents and others.

The findings of this study through observation also showed that most women with disabilities in Bulawayo Province were in the informal sector than the male

folks. Conversely, women are holding the majority of informal jobs, dominating the informal sector and the begging lot. The needs of persons with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, still remain a peripheral issue. This could be linked to the beliefs, norms and values of African setting that paid work was reserved for the males. These findings were in line with the results from the *Labour Force Survey (2004)* that, shows an uneven gender distribution, going by either concept of informality, men accounting for nearly three-quarters of employment in the formal sector and of formal jobs. The findings of this study are also in support of *Rugoho and Maphosa (2017)*, sentiments that women with disabilities continue to be treated as second-class citizens. These women are excluded from economic empowerment initiatives on account of their gender and their disability regardless the 4IR that makes task achievement easier and faster even for people with disabilities.

The study also established that there were cases of violations of human rights at workplaces and in prospective workplaces. Most of the respondents said they were not aware of the Human Rights Commission of Zimbabwe. Some respondents, said their knowledge was however hindered by communication systems used in many circles like print which is considered as the normalcy in the circles of education. The 4IR presents quite a number of communication systems that are suitable for people who are differently abled, thus if correctly enhanced communication will not be a barrier for people with disabilities. The findings of this study are in agreement with *Jago et al. (2021)*, who explored the communication preferences of students with disabilities, and noted that it is crucial for people with disabilities to be asked and respected in their communication preferences. They also revealed that studying communication preferences reframes disability as a cultural identity rather than as medically or deficit-based.

A respondent confirms that she knew that in Zimbabwe there is a policy on education for all, but further pointed out that not much is done to see the education of girls with disabilities. She noted that she had to board buses to some unit in the province or be a boarder at some special schools in other provinces which inconvenienced her education especially on the funding part, which was a challenge. The respondent was bitter on the government on her lack of education citing that if only there was a school that could teach her in braille in her neighbourhood she could be the most educated woman in the neighbourhood. Some respondents felt that there were not enough policies to protect and guide the education of a girl child with disabilities as most school's curriculum did not cater for them in anyway. It was cited by most respondents that most schools do not cater or the needs of people with disabilities in terms of material and human resources. The findings of this study are in tandem with the study conducted by *SINTEF (2003)*, that indicated 32 per cent of people with disabilities in Zimbabwe have had no schooling (36 per cent had some primary schooling, and 32 per cent had some education beyond primary level).

The results of this study are in agreement with these other previous studies. A

study by [NASCOH \(2013\)](#) indicated that the high rate of unemployment among people with disabilities in Zimbabwe is mainly due to lack of qualifications and to discrimination from employers. Those few people with disabilities who attend school often do not receive informed career guidance, and are not aware of appropriate career opportunities. According to the Norwegian [SINTEF \(2001\)](#) in its Disability Living Conditions Survey carried out in 2001, 28 per cent of children with disabilities never attended school, compared with only 10 per cent of non-disabled children. 34 per cent of girls with disability and 22 per cent of boys never attend school compared with only 12 and 8 per cent of the nondisabled respectively. Schooling or education and employment are interlinked and they influence each other immensely.

The study revealed that most schools and workplaces are not user friendly for women with disabilities. Most people with disabilities have mobility challenges hence, it was noted that crossing roads with busy traffic was not easy for them. These physical barriers cause people with disabilities to spend extra time and effort to meet their goals at work if the company is still rooted in the traditional way of doing things than grabbing the opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The findings of this study confirm the studies which were done previously and discovered that women with disabilities had restricting environments as the major challenge for them to fully participate in the society. The issue of restricting environments was also raised in the study by Morris 1997 in [Randolph & Andresen \(2004\)](#) that most workplaces have environmental physical barriers that impact negatively on the performance of people with visual disabilities. Least restrictive environment can also be created by availing of assistive devices that will enable an individual to overcome the shortcomings that come with disability. The 4IR is the answer to overcoming challenges presented by disabilities.

The following were the major findings of the study:

- Women with disabilities face difficulties in orientation and mobility due to unfriendly infrastructure.
- Communication becomes a challenge as most people with disabilities have unique communication preferences.
- There is need for least restrictive environment at workplaces and in schools to promote inclusion.
- Women with disabilities face discrimination in the name of culture.
- Some employers view women with disabilities as without rights and incapable.
- There are no adequate policies that control the education of the girl child with disabilities and inadequate implementation of the adopted policies.

8. Conclusion

Inclusion is regarded as a synergy for providing equitable, quality education and life opportunities for people with disabilities including women. This research

concluded that it is paramount to promote and facilitate equitable provision of quality and relevant special equipment to women with disabilities at workplaces and remove gender stereotypes for them to be productive and perform like their male counterparts. In order to mind arrest challenges bedevilling inclusion of women with disabilities in employment, issues such as the infrastructural adaptation, assistive technology, implementation of policies, gender based socio-cultural expectations, employer and co-employee attitudes and above all embracing the benefits of the 4IR at schools and in the industry need attention. Improvements in the highlighted areas would mean that girl students with disabilities in inclusive education can effectively benefit socially, emotionally and academically from such inclusive educational arrangements thus equipping them with the skills for employment and putting to use socio-economical developmental potentials.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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