Original Research Article

Challenges, Promoting Factors of Disparity and Coping Strategies for Women Employees with Disabilities: Evidence from Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Background: Persons with disabilities, particularly women, often face discrimination and marginalization. This undermines the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that promote equality and equity. Therefore, identifying the underlying factors and ways to ameliorate such challenges is imperative for ensuring equality and inclusiveness.

Objectives: The study's main objectives were to identify the challenges faced by women with disabilities in their workplaces in Malawi, promoting factors that cause such challenges and the coping strategies adopted in overcoming such challenges.

Method: The present study adopted a qualitative research design. The participants in the study were forty-five working women with disabilities identified through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed thematically.

Results: The results revealed that women employees with disabilities face diverse challenges, such as stigma and prejudice. The factors that promoted such challenges included the gender, marital status, and minority status of these women. The study also revealed self-confidence and withdrawal as different coping strategies adopted by these women.

Conclusion: The current study demonstrated the need to increase awareness, support, and targeted intervention services for women with disabilities in the workplace, especially women in a volatile society such as Malawi, to enhance social and cultural inclusiveness.

Contribution: The study created greater awareness of the need to provide an enabling environment and social security for women with disabilities in the workplace.

Keywords: challenges, coping strategy, disability, promoting factors, women, workplace

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the population of people with disabilities is estimated to be one billion (approximately 15 per cent of the world's population), of which approximately 80 per cent are of working age (World Health Organization, WHO, 2021). In developing countries, the percentage of the population living with disabilities is high because of the prevalence

of poverty. Several studies (Braithwaite & Mont, 2009; Mont & Cuong, 2011; Trani & Loeb, 2012; Mitra et al., 2013; Eide & Ingstad, 2013) have shown a relationship between poverty and the risk of disability, stating that poverty exacerbates malnutrition, poor health care, a polluted environment, unsafe water, and poor sanitation among poor households. About 86.5% of the population of Malawi, a nation in South-Eastern Africa, lives in rural areas, making it one of the least developed nations in the world. Like many other low-income nations, Malawi relies heavily on agriculture, with the industry accounting for around 30.2% of the country's GDP (Pauw et al., 2011).

More research needs to be conducted on the nature of informal work in urban regions and business districts in Malawi, concentrating on the rural realities of work in Malawi, particularly farming (Hazarika & Sarangi, 2008). In 2020, approximately 77.79% of Malawi's population between the ages of 15 and 65 was in the labor force (Statista, 2021). This translates to 3.5 million individuals working in Malawi, most of whom are in the informal sector, making it challenging to calculate the nation's unemployment and under-employment statistics. Instead of focusing primarily on people with impairments, they support young people as they enter a formal economy. Malawi's population is young, with a median age of 17 years (Statista, 2021); as a result, the country's development strategies place employment—present and future—at the center (Chinsinga & Chasukwa, 2018).

The challenges faced by people with disabilities are similar to those faced by many other jobseekers. A few obstacles include the need for work-based learning opportunities, high-quality skills, and professional development programs. However, women face specific gender-based obstacles, such as continued informality (Khan, 2020) and conceptual issues with private sector development programs (Quak & Flynn, 2019).

In response, previous governments in Malawi have introduced legislation that promotes the inclusion of people with disabilities, such as the 1971 Handicapped Persons Act, which led to the Malawi Council for the Handicapped (MACOHA) and the 2006 National Policy on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, long before the ratification of the UN Convention. The United Nations CRPD, which Malawi ratified in 2007, includes specific instructions for supporting people with disabilities in their work and employment, as contained in Article 27. However, practice limits the enactment of CRPD commitment. Equally, the Convention led to Malawi's ratification of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 100 (on equal pay) and 111 (on discrimination), both of which are aimed at promoting workplace protections and rights of those with disabilities. In 2012, the Malawian government passed the Disability Act, which strengthened Malawi's commitment to the rights of people with disabilities. This led to the creation of the National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy in 2018.

Despite this, employment rates for people with disabilities continue to dwindle, particularly in the districts of Lilongwe and Blantyre. Due to their extensive economic wealth, Lilongwe and Blantyre districts are invariably Malawi's two biggest cities. The Lilongwe 2018–2023 National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and Implementation Plan was created in response to evidence of poor representation of the primarily informal impaired workforce in cities. This supports the rationale behind selecting these cities for the current study (Remnant et al., 2022). However, according to data from the 2018 census, 12% of Malawi's dynamic labour force comprises people with disabilities (National Statistical Office, 2019), with a ratio of 47% for females and 53% for males. Women with disabilities in Malawi have experienced various types of discrimination. They are frequently at a higher disadvantage than their male counterparts (NSSP, 2018) because of their inability to find formal employment caused by restricted economic possibilities and further exacerbated by obstacles such as discrimination, poor accessibility, and lack of acceptable accommodations.

Furthermore, the population of women with disabilities in Malawi is approximately 937,536, representing 6.2 per cent of the total population (National Statistics Office 2018). These women are at a higher risk of marginalization given that Malawi has a high rate of gender inequality. According to the United Nations Gender Inequality Index (GII), Malawi ranked 173rd among 188 countries (USAID, 2015). Similarly, Malawi was positioned 142nd out of 162 countries and exhibited the third highest gender inequality index. In addition, the SINTEF 2017 survey report showed that 58 per cent of persons with disabilities, especially women, were unemployed. The remaining percentage often encounters discrimination and biases, which impede the achievement of UN sustainable development goals. Sustainable Development Goal Eight aims for decent work for all and inclusive economic growth. As a result, a large number of disabled women work in informal, low-paying jobs or risk being unemployed, as well as living in poverty. For instance, the Federation of Disability Organizations in Malawi (FEDOMA) discovered that only 14% of women with impairments were employed.

According to a UN Women study, which supports the claim mentioned above, women with disabilities in Malawi experience greater rates of abuse and have less access to support services and the legal system (NSSP, 2018). As a result, numerous organizations in Malawi have worked towards promoting the rights and empowerment of women with disabilities. Among such organizations are the Malawi Association of the Deaf Women (MADW) and Disabled Women in Development (DIWODE). However, employed women with disabilities often face discrimination in society and the workplace. Hence, understanding the challenges and coping strategies of women with disabilities at the workplace is relevant to achieving SDG 8 (decent work and Economic Growth) and SDG 5 (gender equality).

The existing literature (Ababneh, 2016; Maja et al., 2011; Noor et al., 2018; Ta et al., 2011) has analyzed various dimensions of employability among persons with disabilities. However, there is limited emphasis on the challenges faced by women living with disabilities in Africa, especially in Malawi. Although previous studies, such as Ta and Leng (2013), have examined the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, they primarily focused on the challenges faced in gaining employment among those with disabilities.

Thus, there is a paucity of studies on the challenges faced by women with disabilities in their workplaces, promoting factors, and coping strategies adopted in the course of such challenges. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the challenges faced by women with disabilities at their workplace in Malawi, the promoting/triggering factors, and the coping strategies adopted to overcome such challenges. Based on the review of the literature, the researchers sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by working women with disabilities in Malawi?
2. What factors promote the challenges faced by working women with disabilities in Malawi?
3. What coping strategies have been adopted by working women with disabilities to keep aloof in their workplace?

METHODS

Setting

This study was conducted in the central business districts of Lilongwe and Blantyre. Both districts are cities with a combination of urban, semi-urban, and rural societies. The districts host many NGOs and private organizations, and the civil service has various ministries operating in both districts at the administrative and technical levels. Furthermore, the two districts have government-owned universities, colleges, and training

centers. Lilongwe and Blantyre also have vocational rehabilitation and skills training centers owned by NGOs and private organizations. The two districts have officials/representatives of Malawi's various disabled persons' organizations (DPO) and those working in civil service, the private sector, and the mainstream disability sector. For demographics and workplaces of respondents, (see Table 1 and Fig.1).

Table 1: Demographics

Age		25-55 years
Mean Age		37.40 years
SD		6.33
Gender	Females	45
Marital status		
Single		28 (62.2%)
Married		12 (26.7%)
Divorced/Widowed		5 (11.1%)
Educational Qualification		
Diploma Certificate		13 (28.9%)
Junior Certificate of Education		8 (17.8%)
Bachelor's Degree		10 (22.2%)
Malawi School Certificate of Education		14 (31.1%)

Of these, the mean age of the respondents was 37.40 (SD =6.33). The majority (62.2%) were single; 26.7% were married; and 11.1% were divorced or widowed. Despite living with disabilities, the respondents attained some level of education. Regarding educational qualification, 28.9% of the respondents had diploma certificates, 17.8% had a Junior Certificate of Education (JCE), 22.2% had bachelor's degrees, and 31.1% had a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE).
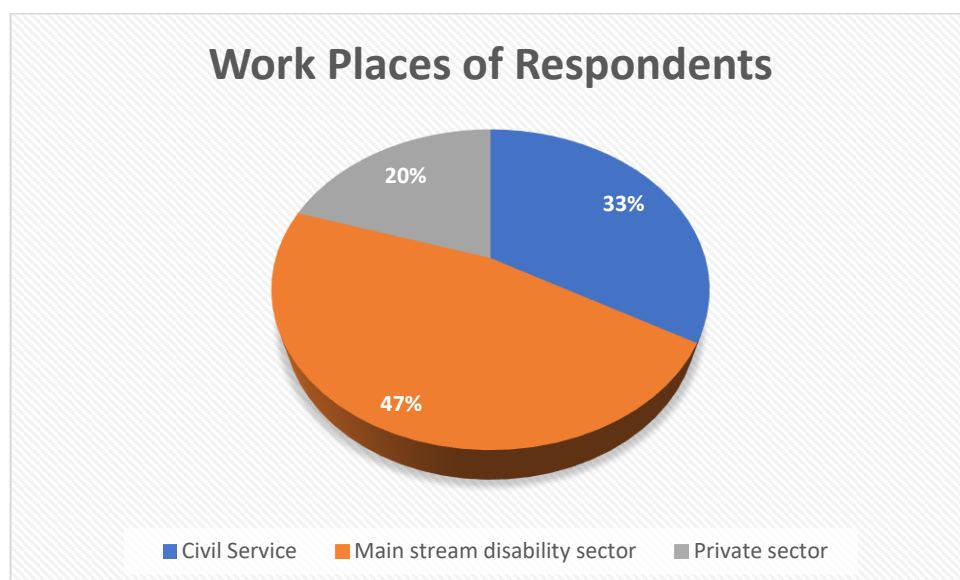

Figure 1: Work Sector of Respondents

The majority of the respondents (47%) worked at the Malawi Council of the Handicapped and various organizations for disabled persons, such as Malawi Against Physical Disabilities. In comparison, approximately 33% and 20% of respondents worked in the civil service and private sectors, respectively.

Study design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach because the researchers were interested in understanding the challenges from the viewpoint of individuals with disabilities. This is pertinent because the qualitative research approach provides a comprehensive knowledge of human behaviour and associated factors (Lewis, 2015). In-depth interviews and a focus group discussion design were applied in the management of data collection for the study. This gave the researchers valuable insight into respondents' experiences, opinions, and perceptions, which is apt for understanding the nuances of human behaviour and subjective experience.

The respondents were 45 working women with different disabilities in the Lilongwe and Blantyre districts of Malawi. Seven (7) had PW Albinism, eight (8) had PW blind or visual impairment, two (2) had PW deafness, and twenty-eight (28) had physical disabilities (See Table 2).

Table 2: Varying Degrees of Participants' Disabilities

Disability	Frequency	Percentage
Albinism	7	15.6 %
Blind/Visually Impaired	8	17.8%
Deaf	2	4.4%
Physically Disabled	28	62.2%
Total	45	100

The study sample was selected from among working females with disabilities in the Lilongwe and Blantyre Districts. The sample size was calculated using the Raosoft online sample size calculator with a 5% margin of error, 95% confidence level, and 50% response rate. Thus, the sample size of 45 used in the current study was greater than the estimated sample size of 44. The population considered was 49 women with disabilities employed in the civil service, private, and mainstream sectors in Lilongwe and Blantyre Districts of Malawi. This sample size method has been used in most qualitative studies (e.g., Abdulsaum et al., 2023). The participants were recruited from the private, public, and mainstream sectors of Malawi with the assistance of DPOs representing different disability organizations in Malawi. Malawi is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), hereto legally adopt the general conceptualization of disability to include people with physical, intellectual, mental, and sensory impairments, in conjunction with contextual and environmental factors that impede their full participation in daily life (UN, 2006).

Data were collected using a face-to-face In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide comprising five unstructured questions. The questions in the interview guide focused on the challenges faced by working women with disabilities, the factors fuelling these challenges, and the coping strategies they adopted in their workplace. The interviews were scheduled to last 10-15 minutes with little leverage for participants with more profound experience and valuable information and were willing to extend the discussion.

Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the data collected. This is because the qualitative study used face-to-face interviews (Williams & Moser, 2019). First, interview responses were recorded after permission was granted from the participants. After the interview, the data were translated from the original recordings (Chichewa) to English because most interviews were conducted in the native language (Chichewa). This involved careful editing and scrutiny of the data recorded in the interviews to ensure data accuracy (Kothari, 2004). In addition, the data were coded to identify fundamental structures and factors such as words, sentences, and meanings. This is pertinent because coding links

data collection and interpretation of its central (parent) and subcodes, whereby the latter reflects the main related idea in meaning (Lewis, 2015). To achieve this, MAXQDA software was used for the coding process, whereby the transcribed interview data were imported into MAXQDA as a Word document. The software makes it easy for researchers to extract direct quotes from the participants on the issues that they thought were central to the focus of the study.

The researchers went through the interview text paragraph-by-paragraph and ascribed tags, labels, or codes to the text based on understanding what the participants were portraying. However, these codes were divided into central (parent) and subcodes, as Lewis (2015) identified. These codes were then grouped to identify themes emerging from the data. Thus, these themes invariably became the yardstick or basis for the presentation and discussion of results.

Trustworthiness

The robustness of the current study hinges on the fact that the study findings follow the tenets and criteria of applicability and dependability (implying that the researchers strived to make future research replicable through a detailed research design on the tools utilized in data collection interpretation and analysis), transferability (achieved in the present study through an intricate background of the study area carried out in Lilongwe and Blantyre, which are Malawi's central business districts, thus allowing the extrapolation of the research findings to similar study areas), conformability (implying data collection and analysis objectivity, through safe-keeping of data collected for replication and validation of the findings when required by other researchers), neutrality, and credibility (implying that the study inquiry was conducted in a way that the participants were described correctly and identified. Thus, the qualitative methodology adopted for the study was stipulated, involving face-to-face interviews of the participants selected through purposive sampling, ensuring consistency as postulated by Denzian and Lincoln (2011) and Shenton (2004) for data collection and analysis. Purposive sampling was used because the study centered on a specific domain (female employees with disabilities). According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposive sampling aids select participants that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information by identifying and selecting cases that will use limited research resources effectively. Thus, this sampling method has been used in qualitative studies (Kelly, 1994; Miles & Muberman, 2010).

Ethical considerations

Before data collection, participants were informed about the aim and purpose of the study and what the intended findings would be used for. Those who consented to participate provided signed consent forms. Permission to conduct the study was sought from the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability, and Social Welfare (protocol number ADM/02/014). This study followed all procedures under the guidelines for ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2013.

RESULTS

The following themes emerged from the data: women with disabilities as a minority population in the labour force; absence/lack of access to compatible facilities in the workplace; social stigma and uninformed attitudes towards women with disabilities as factors promoting the plight of women with disabilities; gender inequality in public and private institutions as hurdles against women with disabilities; the perennial and multidimensional poverty in the developing nations as a threat to working women with disabilities; and self-resilience and supportive network as a coping strategy for working women with disabilities.

Women with Disability as a Minority Group in the Labour Force

Although women with disabilities in the workforce appeared to be a minority in the Lilongwe and Blantyre districts, matters involving their rights capture little or no attention. Even though these rights and privileges are obvious within the workforce and mainstream society, they are ignored, following the minority status of women with disabilities in the labour force.

> *"Male domination in the society-patriarchy common among the African population equally plays out in the circle of people with disabilities. For instance, male colleagues appear to be treated with preference compared to female employees with disabilities in the workplace. This can be observed when we have common and similar challenges in the place of work, such as promotion issues."*

> *"Gender-specific rights for women with disabilities need more attention, as they face unique challenges; efforts to promote gender equality often overlook the intersection of gender and disability, and this automatically hides the population of the women with disabilities from the public attention"*

Due to a lack of awareness and poor attitudes towards disability, respondents expressed how they were exposed to various misconceptions and prejudices in their workplaces:

> *"In my place of work, the issue of disability is totally misunderstood due to poor awareness among the co-workers. It is even worse when it involves genders, such as ours, who are graded as second-class citizens. Females in Malawi are technically treated as second-class citizens, and when one is involved in one disability issue or the other, she is unconsciously excused in public places with the view that she is a liability to society even in the place of work".*

> *"Both in the public and private sectors of employment, the gender discrimination and patriarchal issues are systematic especially as they affect women with disability in the workplace. Access to opportunities such as loans and support in time of needs are unnecessarily difficult for women with disabilities in their institutions of employment due to the stringent measures, which are gender stereotyped."*

The poor awareness of people with disabilities, and women in the workforce specifically, often creates the problem of a blanket approach to the issues of women with disabilities even when there is the slightest opportunity to manage the issue in different contexts, as the people handling this do with some complexities and segregations. Due to the poor awareness of people with disabilities, even people at the helm of affairs in the workplace ignore or treat with kid gloves the issues affecting women with disabilities in the workforce.

> *"In the workplace, the needs of women with disability are not usually the same with even the male fellows with disability; however, in the work place the cases involving women with disability are treated anyhow in comparison with their male colleagues and even other employees in the workplace."*

Absence/Lack of Access to Compatible Facilities in the Work Force

For women with disabilities in the workplace, certain facilities and conditions are necessary to inspire their jobs. These include accessible infrastructure, such as ramps, elevators, and wider doorways. Administratively, the organization ought to create a conducive atmosphere for women with disabilities to easily operate in the system without discrimination and abuse. As such, management of public and private organizations has the duty of training co-workers and management of disability awareness and etiquette to

handle employees' grievances as well as human rights violations; however, the reality is the opposite. In most cases, management in the private and mainstream government labour force does not pay attention to these observations as the facilities in these places lack evidence of accommodating people with disabilities.

> *"Very few places show signs of accommodating people with disabilities; the few of these I have observed have sufficient moving space around the working environment: wider doors, wider corridors, spacious toilet room etc. These allow women with disabilities working in these places with the mobility and independence needed to comfortably navigate the environment and operate without much help from others".*

As stated by another participant:

> *"women with disabilities in the workplace encounter limited access to assistive devices and technologies necessary for efficient job performance".*

Policy-wise, public and private employers in Malawi are virtually out of tune with the current global interests and agenda concerning people with disabilities, which is reflected in the infrastructural design of the workplace and the management of the employees' relationship policy. In most private and public institutions employing people with disabilities, the infrastructure lacks disability-friendly design and assistive technologies and other necessary facilities, particularly for women with disabilities. Likewise, most public and private institutions in Malawi lacked policies on the orientation of employees regarding their relationship with people with disabilities in the workplace.

> *"There is a need for training for co-workers and management on disability awareness and etiquette as this is lacking among the public and private institutions in Malawi"; "Lack of awareness about disabilities by others who are not leads to misconceptions and prejudices regarding their capabilities."*

> *"Due to the increasing prejudice against people with disabilities, women in particular are becoming vulnerable to discrimination and misconception in the workplace, leading to deprivation and selected injustice by some colleagues who have phobia against disability"*

> *"My personal encounter with some top management officials in my organization of employment made me to realize that the unguarded relationship between people with disabilities especially women with disabilities and other employees really put them at the risk of individual differences in the workplaces in Malawi, which can be negative against women employees with disabilities"*

Social Stigma and Uninformed Attitude towards Women with Disabilities as Promoting factors to the plight of women with disabilities in the workforce

The problem of people with disabilities is compounded by how the people around them in the family, community, and other public places relate to them. Among developing nations such as Malawi, social stigma is an enduring factor in dealing with people with disabilities. While the problem of social stigma is anchored to an uninformed attitude towards people with disabilities, an uninformed attitude is the product of poor and absence of public awareness about the uniqueness of people with disabilities and, in the long run, results in an endless cycle of stigma against people with disabilities in public places and, more often, in workplaces. Women with disabilities are treated with prejudice as part of the social stigma they face in the workforce.

> *"Much as I have worked in both public and private sectors, where one would expect that there is a great understanding of disability and that stigma and prejudice should not exist, it is a general opinion of many, even at my workplace, that persons with disabilities are difficult people"*

Owing to the enduring pressure of social stigma against people with disabilities among the population, prejudice and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities in most working settings are pronounced in the behaviors of their work colleagues. Women with disabilities in the workplace are surrounded by a negative impression of the majority of people working with them, which always surfaces in times of misunderstanding and individual differences.

"Many of my co-workers and my bosses have a negative attitude towards me, some being so open about it and expressing it in public and others concealing it as much as possible."

In addition, one of the participants stated, 'Many of my colleagues and superiors displayed a negative attitude towards disabled individuals, sometimes in public and other times hidden.'

"Despite working in the mainstream disability sector, I've seen the prevailing opinion that persons with disabilities are difficult to work with, even within my workplace".

"Women with disabilities especially the single ladies like us are treated with some level of disrespect compared to our male counterparts. This is evident in the times of seeking assistance financially and otherwise, which may require some protocols and trust. This is when you will discover that even your work colleagues do see you as lower-class citizens with little or no value depending on the type of disability you have".

Gender Inequality in the Public and Private Institutions as a Hurdle against Women with Disabilities

Having faced the challenges of gender inequality entrenched in social institutions such as the family, education, economy, politics, and employment, women with disabilities in the workplace are already trapped in a cycle of demeaning treatment.

"Because of the Gender inequality concerning education and qualifications, the challenges women with disabilities face concerning career advancement is more complex and complicated in Malawi."

Efforts to promote gender equality often overlook the intersection of gender and disability, which is a chronic problem for the freedom and liberty of women with disabilities. Gender-specific rights for women with disabilities require more attention as they face unique challenges.

"Gender-specific rights for women with disabilities need more attention, as they face unique challenges; efforts to promote gender equality often overlook the intersection of gender and disability".

"In the workplace, women with disabilities are not considered for technological assistance such as provision of specialized equipment for the visually impaired persons, people with hearing impairment and those with mobility impairment who are almost competing with their colleagues in the place of work. In this same condition, promotions are considered with unfriendly measures to women with disabilities"

"In my workplace, when it comes to the benefits beyond our salary, only men and other people who have connections are dominating in the place of work and do not allow us who look helpless in the face of corrupt system to access opportunities. There are no specific policies providing women with a disability advantage for promotion, study opportunities, and other benefits in the place of work".

The Perennial and Multidimensional Poverty in the Developing Nations as a Threat to Working Women with Disabilities

In Malawi, private and public institutions hosting workers to different degrees lacked extant humanitarian policies concerning people with disabilities. Although people with disabilities in the workforce, especially women, need disability-friendly facilities to perform effectively in the workplace as is obtainable in developed nations, such facilities are almost absent in Malawi. This is due to the poor infrastructure and facilities in the workplace.

> *"Disability-friendly facilities are often inadequate due to lack of funding, leaving many needs unmet; primarily, women with visible disabilities and mobility impairments tend to use these facilities though lack of awareness limits utilization of these facilities."*

Compelling yet disability-friendly workplace policies and infrastructure are lacking in most institutions in Malawi. Female employees with disabilities in Malawi struggle with facilities and workplace policies, ignoring their conditions and rights. As one of the participants stated:

> *"Basic rights such as safe working conditions and protection against discrimination are recognized but not always upheld because of limited resources to support having the necessary things in the workplace."*

> *"Facilities are often inadequate due to lack of funding, leaving many needs unmet at the workplace." "Another challenge is limited resources and funding; this hinders the creation of disability-friendly work environments".*

> *"Due to poor policy infrastructure in both public and private institutions in Malawi, especially as it affects women with disability, women with disability in workplaces are facing discrimination and abuse. In my own case, my experiences in the hands of my male colleagues always depict the hopeless situation of women with disabilities in this part of the world….. they can treat you as if you have no value because of your condition and, no existing policy to control the excesses of those who have phobia against people with disabilities"*

Self-Resilience and Supportive Network as a Coping Strategy for Working Women with Disability

Women with disabilities over the years do form domineering attitudes against discouragement. In a setting in which they maintain some level of constant communication with their colleagues, they form a sustainable network to meet their needs and encourage each other. In the case of female employees with disabilities in Malawi, the dominant culture of self-resilience and supportive networks among people with disabilities has become a systematic landing gear. As one of the participants stated,

> *"The women with disabilities in the workplace cope by relying on personal determination and resilience to overcome workplace challenges; even though our colleagues create the impression that we are miserable because of our condition, seeing a fellow with disability and self-confidence inspires us and keep us moving"*

> *"I just chose always to ignore whatever challenge I face, regardless of the degree of the challenge or its effects. I just let it out. I have reaped no positive outcomes for many years after using other strategies like reporting or trying to fight for my rights by sensitizing the people, among others".*

Among female employees with disabilities in Malawi, there is a gradual and formidable network that has helped stabilize them in the workplace due to common experiences in the workplace and encouragement of one another to understand their peculiar situation in the workplace and society due to their condition. According to one of the participants,

"The female employees with disability in the workplace also form supportive networks within the workplace which help them navigate difficulties facing them in the workplace."

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the challenges, promoting factors, and strategies of female employees with disabilities, with a focus on workplace relationships and infrastructural and institutional factors forming the major thrust of the study. Following the thematic analysis of the collected data, the study captured the dimensions of the challenges, the promoting factors, and the coping strategies adopted by working women with disabilities in the workforce. The findings revealed that women with disabilities encounter various challenges in the workplace, such as stigma and prejudice, a lack of facilities and infrastructure for people with disabilities, and exclusion from the benefits of working in different institutions where they have been employed. For instance, the impact of stigma and prejudice highlights the challenges and discriminatory treatment that working women with disabilities encountered in their workplaces. Consequently, these discriminatory attitudes contribute to lower confidence levels, difficulties in adapting to the work environment, and potential limitations in accessing work-related benefits. Previous studies (Friedman, 2020; Ismail & Mujuru, 2020; Morwane et al., 2021; Remnant et al., 2022) have shown that individuals with disabilities face many challenges such as difficulty accessing social services, limited education and skill development, lack of awareness and training, and employment and discrimination challenges. According to the SINTEF (2017) survey and NSSP (2018) findings, women with disabilities are the most vulnerable to workplace marginalization and discrimination. Despite many Acts and legislations on disability, such as the Disability Act of 2012, Malawi Council for the Handicapped (MACOHA), the 2006 National Policy on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability, National Disability Main Stream Strategy and Implementation Plan, and ratification of the UN Convention on supporting people with disabilities in work and employment against discrimination put in place, the desired results are far-fetched. Thus, these findings emphasize the need to address and mitigate these challenges to ensure fair treatment and equal opportunities for women with disabilities in the workplace. However, participants' responses generally revealed that many needed more knowledge regarding their rights and the processes for claiming them, which hindered their ability to effectively assert their needs. Consequently, reporting instances of human rights violations to authorities was impeded by fear of reprisal from the individuals being reported, as well as the perceived slow or inadequate response from relevant authorities, a situation constantly altering global efforts to eradicate discrimination and maltreatment against people with disabilities (Eide & Ingstad, 2013; MacLachlan et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the study's findings revealed some perceived factors contributing to discrimination against working women with disabilities, such as social stigma, gender inequality, and lack of workplace policy to protect women with disabilities in the workplace. More importantly, the problem of uninformed attitudes among people related to women with disabilities in their workplaces further complicates the challenges women face. Following the poor awareness or even lack of awareness in the workplace about women with disabilities and their peculiarities, most of their colleagues hold grudges against them based on prejudice informed by mere labelling of the group by other people, such that they are commonly seen as difficult people to work with. Institutionally, the prevailing poverty in the system, which has virtually encroached on the policy process, has encouraged unhealthy work environments for women with disabilities. This reflects the poor infrastructural design and outlooks, typically anti-disabilities in nature, and the absence of workplace orientation involving the knowledge and understanding of women in the workplace with disabilities. Previous studies (Fide & Ingstad, 2011; National

Statistics Office, 2019) aligned with the perceived promoting factors revealed in this present study and asserted that these factors are detrimental to actualizing equity and inclusiveness in every sphere and sector of the economy concerning people with disabilities. These perceived promoting factors are inimical to the goals of establishing the Malawi Disability Act of 2012 and the UNCRT. Other perceived triggers of discrimination against women with disabilities in their workplace include societal attitudes and stereotypes, limited education, limited economic opportunities, and inadequate legal protection (MacLachlan et al., 2014). Thus, there is a need for relevant authorities and NGOs saddled with the responsibility of promoting the rights of people with disabilities to reinvigorate their activities in line with the present reality.

However, the findings revealed that the respondents adopted different coping mechanisms in confronting the challenges, including withdrawal from free interactions with colleagues due to abuse and social stigma as a coping strategy, signifying social detachment with little verbal communication. The findings show that women with disabilities in the workplace are unconsciously subjected to mental trauma by their colleagues, following the prevalence of prejudice and other elements of discrimination and abuse. Equally, women have gradually adapted to these challenges by confronting them squarely, irrespective of their disabilities, ignoring the expectation of being treated equally with people without disabilities. This, by implication, has amounted to self-confidence and optimism over time as coping strategies. However, in some situations, women seek redress momentarily by complaining to authorities when faced with challenges in the workplace. Thus, adopting a proactive and common approach to coping behaviour decreases the emotional and psychological trauma associated with PWDs. This aligns with extant studies showing that proactive behaviour toward task-oriented issues decreases depressive symptoms (Penninx et al., 2013; Rao & Chen, 2022). This shows that, to navigate against discrimination in the workplace by working with women with disabilities, they employ some of these measures to stay aloft (Fumey, 2017; Chirwa et al., 2019). For example, previous studies (Braathen &Kyam, 2008) aligned with this finding that advocacy through assertiveness and confidence and building support networks through constituted authorities and NGOs can be effective coping strategies against discrimination and seeking redress. However, coping strategies employed by people with disabilities may be influenced by individual factors such as the type and severity of the disability, personal strengths, and available resources. These findings underscore the importance of establishing a supportive framework to protect working women with disabilities and promote their rights. Further research in this direction is needed to explore the effectiveness of these provisions and identify additional measures that can be implemented to foster a safe and empowering work environment for women, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and overall well-being.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study's findings provide valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this research, which may influence the validity and generalizability of the findings. Potential constraints include limited sample size, geographic focus, and the subjective nature of self-reported experiences. These factors may affect the depth of insights gained and the applicability of the conclusions drawn. Recognizing these limitations helps to better navigate the complexities of the subject, which helps provide a more nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of these women within the Malawian socioeconomic environment.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the challenges and coping strategies of employed women with disabilities in workplaces in Malawi. The findings show that the major challenges women

face are stigmatization, prejudice, and low wages. Other challenges include exclusion from staff development training and a lack of facilities and infrastructure for people with disabilities. Notably, most respondents showed depressive symptoms, such as withdrawal, little socialization, and verbal communication. However, participants developed self-confidence and optimism over time as a coping strategy and sought redress through complaints to the constituted authorities. Hence, there is a need for increased awareness of people with disabilities to understand their social and cultural constructs. The findings of the study eventually project the need for the Malawian government to promote equity and inclusion to improve the working conditions and general welfare of people with disabilities, particularly women, through policy measures and support services. Equally, the study's findings have shown the need to ensure that employees are well-informed about their rights, including the procedures for reporting violations, which can be achieved by disseminating comprehensive job descriptions and workplace policies, explicitly outlining employees' rights, and the mechanisms for addressing violations. This study suggests that implementing sensitization and education programs within the workplace can further enhance employees' understanding of their rights and empower them to assert their needs.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings highlight the urgent need for targeted educational and developmental interventions. Thus, it is essential to recommend policy improvements to foster an inclusive work environment. Policymakers should prioritize the development of comprehensive disability inclusion strategies, including mandatory training of employers on accessibility and diversity. Furthermore, establishing partnerships with local organizations can facilitate mentorship programs, providing women with disabilities with the tools and confidence they need to navigate their careers effectively. These recommendations aim to create a supportive framework that addresses existing disparities and promotes the advancement of women with disabilities in the workforce. By prioritizing these recommendations, researchers can inform more effective policymaking that promotes equitable employment opportunities and, ultimately, strengthens the workforce in Malawi and similar contexts globally.

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