

Experiential Narratives of Persons with Disabilities on Zambia's Electoral Processes in Lusaka District

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Abstract- The aim of this research was to explore experiences of persons with disabilities in the electoral processes within Lusaka District. The study focuses on stories around electoral conflicts, accessibility of polling stations, electoral materials and adequacy of laws and policies that promote electoral and political participation of persons with disabilities. This study demonstrates that in Zambia, persons with disabilities experience challenges at an individual level. The study used semi structured interviews to collect data and a narrative approach coupled with some thematic analysis was used in the process of reviewing the responses from participants. Purposive sampling was used in the selection process of participants and a total of 19 individuals living with disabilities were involved in this study. The findings of this study indicate that participation in electoral processes by persons with disabilities are mainly hindered several issues but key among them is: inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate tactile materials for the visually impaired and other assistive devices and long distances to polling stations. This study has also shown that electoral conflicts is also one of the challenges that persons with disabilities face in their quest to participate in the electoral process at various levels as well as negative perceptions that people without disabilities have towards those with disabilities. With regard to policies, the study has demonstrated that although laws and policies that are aimed at promoting and mainstreaming disability issues in all sectors of development are in place, they fall short of addressing many aspects and challenges faced by persons with disabilities. There is also need to provide voter education and information in accessible formats (for example, large print, electronic format for voters that use screen-reading technology, written material, and easy-to-understand language for persons with intellectual disabilities). The study also strongly recommends providing

closed captions and sign language interpreters on televised voter information announcements.

Indexed Terms- Disabilities, electoral processes, conflicts, sign language, voter education, Lusaka, Zambia

I. BACKGROUND

Persons with disabilities are among the most vulnerable and usually excluded in many aspects of life. In order to enhance the rights of persons with disabilities, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) on 13 December, 2006 and was entered into force on 3rd May, 2008. Zambia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on 10th February, 2010. Article 29 of the UNCRPD outlines the steps that state parties must take to protect the political rights of persons with disabilities [1]. Thus, state parties must ensure participation of persons with disabilities by making the electoral process and all facilities used in the electoral process accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessibility in the electoral process as provided for in the UNCRPD does not only apply to the physical environment but goes beyond and considers the issues of education, communication and provision of a secret ballot to persons with visual impairments and blind persons among other things [2]. It is important to state that the UNCRPD is the first international binding agreement and thus countries bound by the provisions of the Convention. Zambia, after having ratified the UNCRPD commenced the process of domesticating the International Law and this was done through the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act No. 6 of 2012 [3]. By ratifying the Convention, Zambia agreed to ensure the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities have historically

been excluded from exercising and enjoying their human rights in many aspects of their lives including the right to political participation. Zambia has not been an exception to this.

By ratifying the UNCRPD, and enacting the Persons with Disabilities Act, Zambia is obligated to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in the electoral process. Participation in political and public life means that persons with disabilities must be given equal opportunities to take part in elections to run as candidates in elections, as well as to be able to vote for those they want as leaders.

Zambia like many countries in the world today is democratic and allows for free and fair elections to be held to enable the citizens to select leaders who will be charged with the responsibility of running and managing the affairs of the country. Democracy in its factual sense allows for the participation of all eligible candidates to take part in elections as candidates to be voted for and take part in the selection of leaders as voters. As such, a true democratic nation ensures that the most vulnerable and marginalized groups of people or citizens have a voice in the decisions that affect them by having access to the electoral process. The right to vote is a unique indicator of citizenship in a democratic nation like Zambia. In the political sense, Zambia is a democratic dispensation and has had a total of eleven presidential and general elections after gaining her independence on 24th October, 1964. A true democracy requires the inclusion of all citizens and ensuring that the poorest and most marginalized citizens have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their lives [4, 5].

The purpose of this study was to explore narratives around challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the electoral process in Lusaka District. This paper has five key sections. The first part above has given a background of study and assessed related literature. The second section gives a conceptual account of matters around political participation and living with disabilities. The third part focuses on methods. The fourth section deals with findings as given by participants and gives a discussion. The fifth section is conclusion and shows suggestions on areas of further investigation.

Political participation encompasses both taking part in the electoral process as candidates and being able to vote for those who vie for political positions at all levels. The Zambian law through the Constitution and the Electoral Act provides that every person aged eighteen years and above can obtain a voter's card and are thus eligible to vote in elections [6]. While persons with disabilities are not stopped from registering and taking part in elections, most persons with disabilities are hindered from exercising their right to take part in elections due to the inaccessible conditions in which the elections and the electoral process is conducted. There has been a number of calls made by individuals as well as organisations for and of persons with disabilities to mainstream disability in all aspects of life including the electoral process.

However, persons with disabilities, are often among the poorest and comprising approximately 15 percent of the global population, are rarely empowered to participate politically in their countries. The United Nations through the CRPD provides for international standards on making electoral processes accessible to persons with disabilities. Zambia ratified the UNCRPD on 10th February, 2010 and domesticated the Convention through the enactment of the Persons with Disabilities Act No.6 of 2012. By putting in place the Act, the Zambian government holds the responsibility to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with other citizens of the nation. Persons with disabilities must be given opportunities to take part in the electoral process just like any other person. Emerging practices around the globe nonetheless have shown that persons with disabilities can be successfully incorporated in all phases of an electoral process [7]. Further, they can perform a variety of roles beyond exercising the franchise as voter educators, election commissioners, observers, monitors and committee members, and as candidates. The sections that follow reflect evolving state policies and practices by Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), and draw on our experience working in this field to provide guidance for disability inclusion throughout the ongoing process of pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral phases that comprise the electoral cycle.

While the CRPD is the primary benchmark for assessing the political rights of persons with

disabilities, the right to participate in political and public life is firmly instantiated in the foundational instruments comprising the human rights legal framework. Thus, article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognizes the right and article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees to all citizens ‘the right and the opportunity without unreasonable restrictions to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors’ [8]. These provisions are shored up in thematically-oriented treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (article 7) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (article 5), as well as regional human rights instruments. The foregoing standards are given fuller expression and disability-specific content in the UNCRPD. As the only legally binding international human rights treaty on disability rights, the CRPD explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and also contains measures that ensure persons with disabilities are able to achieve full enjoyment of their human rights in political and other spheres [9].

Article 29 of the CRPD requires states parties to ‘ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others’, including the right to vote. Interpreted on its own, and together with provisions of crosscutting applicability in article 3 (general principles), article 4 (general obligations), and article 5 (equality and non-discrimination), the CRPD categorically prohibits all exclusionary practices connected to political participation based on disability status [7, 10].

Despite all these international instruments which try to promote equal participation between those with disabilities and those with disabilities, persons with disabilities have continued to face a number of challenges world-wide. Society systems have often times disadvantaged persons with disabilities in many aspects of their lives. In countries like Zambia efforts are being made towards enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities in different areas of their

lives, there is still much to be done to reach full inclusion and participation in society [11]. During the electoral processes, persons with disabilities continuously face challenges which inherently hinder their full and effective participation in the process. The areas of concern affecting the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process include, lack of accessible voter education, inaccessibility of polling stations and materials, lack of secret ballot as well as communication technology barriers and electoral violence [12]. While sign language may be provided for television adverts and other key programmes, some deaf persons or those with hearing impairments may not have access to television sets as is the case with many persons with disabilities. Thus, the problem remains that inaccessible nature of the electoral process and facilities results in discrimination against persons with disabilities as they are not able to participate in elections on an equal basis with others.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study followed a qualitative strategy. The research design utilized here is descriptive in that it focused on outlining participants’ responses so as to generate meanings. The purpose of descriptive research design as applied here is to state the affairs as experienced by participants. The descriptive research design also helped in that it is not only restricted to fact findings, but the formulation of important principles of knowledge and solutions to significant problem.

The study was undertaken in Lusaka district which is located in Lusaka Province of Zambia. The participants of the study were persons with disabilities or individuals who are physically challenged.

The targeted population sample was 19 participants. This comprised of 8 males and 11 females. The high number of females is based on the 2016 general elections which has a huge participation of Zambian women in the electoral process as voters.

No.	Categorisation – Participant Demographics	No. of Participants
1.	Key Informants (Interviews) from Disabled People’s Organisation	10

2.	In-depth interviews with Persons with disabilities that took part in the 2016 general elections in Townships of Lusaka	9
Total		19

This study used purposive sampling to select respondents as the study is qualitative. Purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling method was selected for the purpose are chosen by the judgment of the researchers. He further notes that researchers often believe that they can obtain a representative sample by using a sound judgment, which results in saving time and money. Considering that this study is focused on disability and access to the electoral process, this sampling method was effective due to the limited numbers of people and organizations who served as primary data sources. The study also drew its participants from different people living with disabilities which helped to enhance representativeness.

Data was collected through the use of interview guides to explore the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in electoral processes in Lusaka. The interview guides were researchers-administered which increased responsiveness and provided explanations for some terms. Face-to-face interaction helped to capture verbal and non-verbal cues. Further, the method ensured accurate screening as individuals were unable to provide false information during screening questions such as gender, and to some extent age.

Data Analysis is the process of systematically applying statistical and/or logical techniques to describe and illustrate, condense and recap, and evaluate data. Several analytic procedures provide a way of drawing inductive inferences from data and distinguishing the signal (the phenomenon of interest) from the noise to present it in the data [13]. The initial coding phase was completed through the process of structural coding, in which the initial raw data (taken from brief notes collected by the researchers during the interview process) was labeled. Data was classified into narrative clusters. This aimed at making sense of what was said by the participants in the collected data and also highlighted the main findings

in the discussion, which involved grouping of stories with themes being identified.

III. FINDINGS

The stories from individuals with disabilities highlighted a number of challenges, some of them specific to their disability type. Blind persons indicated that the most challenging factor to be lack of privacy as they cannot exercise their secret ballot. As can be seen in the comment below by P1:

We do not have privacy when voting, I cannot be certain that the persons assisting has given my vote to my preferred candidate.

Several respondents further highlighted physical inaccessible polling centres and other facilities used in the electoral process as being one of the major challenges faced by persons with disabilities. A wheelchair user said:

I did not vote in the last elections because I felt that I was being degraded. I have a mobility aid and facilities for such important national events and programmes must allow me to exercise my independence.

It is the personal dignity that comes with this process of voting under uncomfortable settings, as seen above that person with disabilities feel their right to vote cannot outweigh their persona. Similarly, another participant [P2] spoke about the deaf's biggest challenge as being communication in political messaging.

Many times, we are thought of last. It is only those that may have television sets that may get know what is going on in the country. Voter education process may not leave out those with hearing disabilities. I have attended campaign rallies where party manifestos are shared and there has been no sign language interpretation and so I get nothing and have nothing to share with my deaf colleagues.

In their narrations, participants confirmed that they faced numerous challenges in accessing the electoral process and hence some shunned participating in the

process. In the views of the respondents, the electoral process is indeed inaccessible to persons with disabilities. However, even though the challenges exist acknowledged nothing much seems to be done in ensuring that improvements are done to enhance the participation of persons with disabilities. For instance, even after the introduction of Braille jacket to enhance secret ballot for the visually impaired, most blind and visually impaired persons were not able to use this facility.

Respondents cited the lack of education on how to use the jacket as the Electoral Commission of Zambia did not for example have effective voter education campaigns on the newly introduced braille jacket during the 2016 elections.

So, I heard about the newly introduced braille jacket which could enable me to exercise my right to a secret ballot but I was not well informed on how to use it. Thus, I opted to use my trustee to guide me and cost the vote on my behalf. I hope the marked on my preferred candidate.

From the above findings we can see that the narrations of participants are based on the form of disability an individual lives with. The stories also represent from the findings an illustration of the varying needs that are shaped by power and language within the frame of disability in electoral processes in a country such as Zambia.

IV. DISCUSSION

- Making Sense of electoral process experiences for person with disabilities

Although participation of people with disabilities in political processes is increasingly recognized as a human rights issue, little is known about how the key UNCRPD principles are translated into day-to-day practice, particularly in low and middle-income countries [14]. The findings from the study have revealed that inaccessible infrastructure such as polling stations as of the many challenges that persons with disabilities face in taking part in the electoral process. This challenge continues to act as a barrier and hinders persons with disabilities to be active citizens and be able to engage in the political life of

their communities. This finding is in line with the observation made by Sackey, who reported that people with disabilities who do manage to register to vote may find further barriers at the polling place [15]. With votes being cast in a variety of public places, from school gyms to church basements to library meeting rooms, most of these voting facilities are inaccessible. This barrier excludes persons with disabilities from the opportunity to influence the development and implementation of laws and policies which shape their daily lives in their society. The study also revealed that inadequate tactile materials for the visually impaired and other assistive devices pose as a challenge in participating in the electoral process. This is consistent with what was reported by Lord and Stein [9]. They reported that absence of alternative voting devices or accessible voting methods poses significant barriers particularly to individuals with visual impairments. Similarly, Young and colleagues [16] reported that communication barriers are experienced by people who have disabilities that affect hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and or understanding, and who use different ways to communicate than people who do not have these disabilities. It was further reported that lack of small print or no large-print, tactile and Braille electoral materials make it difficult for persons with disabilities to participate.

The other challenge that came out from the study was long distances to polling stations and the lack of adequate transportation which interferes with a person's ability to be independent and to participate in the electoral process. This is even worse for persons with disabilities living in rural areas where there is no access to accessible or convenient transportation for people with vision or cognitive impairments, and public transportation is unavailable or at inconvenient distances or locations where polling stations are found. further, where the transport is accessed, most persons with disabilities have a challenge of meeting the cost of transportation as they may incur double the cost that others incur as they may require the assistance of another person. The above findings are in line with observation made by Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (2010) who reported that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), registration centers were problematic due to the poor status of the local roads and the voters' need to travel

as far as 20 kilometers to their nearest centers and that in Mozambique efforts were made to deploy mobile registration centers in rural areas with the objective that no voter should travel more than 10 kilometers to the registration point [17]. The standard distances between polling stations and where people live has not always been met for persons with disabilities as they were still made to travel for more kilometers to register or even vote. These results are a clear evidence that people with disabilities and those who care about them should insist that their towns provide truly accessible voting places as required by the Persons with Disabilities Act No. 6 of 2012, so that each individual can cast a vote just as do his or her fellow citizens.

- Participation as a form empowerment

The stories and extracts from participants shows that empowering persons with disabilities to take their place alongside other citizens in the electoral process, can promote equality and help break barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in political and public life. For example, hiring persons with disabilities to work at polling stations empowers individual poll workers and provides a valuable opportunity to eradicate stereotypes that negatively affect persons with disabilities. Similarly, ensuring women with disabilities are involved in programmes designed to increase the political participation of women provides an opportunity to shift perceptions about disability and gender.

The results of the study also showed that persons with disabilities do not get nominated by political parties to participate in elections as candidates. This shows that stigma against people with disabilities plays a major role in their political marginalization. Various studies such Sakey and Mulubale's work [16, 4] have reported that negative attitudes towards persons with health and any other form of disabilities are often rooted in cultural and social norms, where a disability is associated with punishment from God. According to a study undertaken in Ghana to analyze the disability situation by Osman and others [18], it was found that "people with disabilities were not allowed to become chiefs, even if they were part of the social elite. Those, who did dare to contest in political elections were often mocked or treated unfairly. As a result, many people with disabilities were discouraged from

engaging in politics even if they were educated, aspired to contest and had resources to finance their election campaign." This clearly shows how stigma impedes persons with disabilities from participating in political processes hence the need for more sensitizations and awareness raising campaigns to address this challenge [19]

Further, the study revealed that electoral violence hinders persons with disabilities from participating in the electoral process. Electoral violence can be defined as any random or organized act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or to otherwise influence an electoral process [20]. Electoral violence impacts democracy in various ways and one of them is that the electorate's right to vote is denied and it leads to stalling of good governance and sometimes leads to voting without choice. Persons with disabilities may completely shun participating in the electoral process for fear of being caught up in the violence and failing to escape which may result in injuries or death. To avoid the risks associated with electoral violence, persons with disabilities opt to completely stay away from electoral processes. Shunning electoral processes such pre-election campaign rallies may hinder persons with disabilities from accessing information on what the various political parties and aspirants have to offer once voted into office. This information is cardinal for each citizen as it helps in deciding whom to vote for.

Generally, democracy involves a process of electing leaders who will form a government of the people with a view to representing the interest everyone in society [21]. The above findings show that people with disabilities in electoral processes are less represented if democratic tenets were to be used as a measure. Democracy is aimed at realizing the organization of people by the people themselves to attain collectively self-defined, and ever improving, higher levels of civilization through participatory forms of civic duties at all levels starting from schools [22]. This conception of democracy suggests that it is a representational government, which is based on the consent and will of the people, a responsive and responsible government in which the majority upholds power without suppressing the interest of the majority. From the foregoing definition, therefore, the issue of the denial

of people's right to vote or of their voting preference, or even the restraining of the voice of the people's vote do not arise. Similar to our finding, other studies have reported that electoral violence is a threat to democratization and leads to anti-human acts on person with disabilities as their basic human rights, issues of gender equality; cultural rights and identities are often ignored [23, 24].

CONCLUSION

The research also shown that persons with disabilities experience challenges which range from inaccessible infrastructure such as polling stations, inadequate tactile materials for the visually impaired, lack of accessible communication formats for persons with hearing and speech impairments and other assistive devices as well as long distances to polling stations. The study has noted that electoral violence is a hindrance to full participation of persons with disabilities in electoral processes. It has been found by this study that it is the negative attitudes and contemptuous perceptions towards people with disabilities by the public which tends to discourages differently abled persons from participating in the electoral process. Based on this this study's findings, it is recommended here that continuous human and institutional capacity building is needed to ensure thorough due process, and merit and credibility form the criteria for social relevance. There is also need to conduct further studies on the inclusion of the voice and image of persons with disabilities in civic and voter education materials (for example, designing posters with images of voters with disabilities exercising their right to vote). This initiative will not only encourage persons with disabilities to participate in the electoral process but also reduce the stigma that comes from community.

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