

Chapter 15

Youth and Disability

Nationally, GoG estimates that approximately 10 per cent of the population is living with a recognised disability, 39 per cent of whom are individuals living with multiple disabilities (UNSD, 2016). Persons with disabilities in Ghana are sometimes perceived as a burden to society. The stereotype that they are an economic drain, unproductive and troublesome, and require constant assistance, remains prevalent (Opoku et al., 2017). Family members may deny persons with disabilities adequate support and access to educational resources, owing to feelings of shame or the prohibitive expense. This perpetuates the lack of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities that are critical to their capabilities and asset development (ibid.).

15.1 Persons with Disabilities Act 2006

In 2006, the Persons with Disabilities Act was introduced to legally and constitutionally protect the rights of persons with disabilities with respect to health care, employment, education, transportation, social activities and accessibility of public spaces. Nevertheless, progress has been limited, and many facilities remain inaccessible. The Act has been widely criticised for its failure to protect the rights of persons with disabilities and it has been suggested that GoG re-evaluate and adapt its policies in accordance with the concerns of persons with disabilities (Asante and Sasu, 2015; Tchiakpe, 2018).

The Persons with Disabilities Act prohibits employers from discriminating against persons with disabilities. However, employment opportunities remain limited, as the majority of public and government buildings are inaccessible (Tchiakpe, 2018). Furthermore, as the Act fails to acknowledge the gendered experiences of persons with disabilities and the discrimination that accompanies age and gender disparities, young women with disabilities are not legally protected against gendered discrimination (Asante and Sasu, 2015). In order to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in Ghana, the Persons with Disabilities Act must be amended to encompass the rights of both young women and men, to ensure adequate protection against discrimination and to highlight the importance of a culture of tolerance.

15.2 Ghanaian youth and disability

Young people with disabilities often face an overwhelming amount of discrimination on the basis of age, gender and disability (Asante and Sasu, 2015). GoG must develop policies that specifically address the needs of youth living with disabilities, particularly those of young women. In light of these concerns, Ghana must develop policy to address youth-specific needs to target young people (particularly young women and those in rural areas) living with disability.

15.2.1 Visual impairment

In 2018, the experiences of visually impaired individuals with building accessibility were examined in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Results demonstrated that 100 per cent of visually impaired persons required both a white cane and a sighted guide to access public and government buildings, owing to the absence of accessibility features such as tactile ground surface indicators and audible aids (Tchiakpe, 2018).

However, the scope of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2006 does not cover those with visual impairment, even though elsewhere in the world visual impairment has been recognised as a disability. As such, the Act should be amended to include the rights of this group, with consideration also given to young people, especially girls/women.

15.2.2 Mental health

Ghana's Persons with Disability Act contains minimal focus on those living with mental health challenges. In 2009, MOH reported an increase in the number of people living with psychiatric illnesses, a trend that further indicates the pressing need for adequate support and attention on mental health challenges (WHO and World Bank, 2011). Going forward, improving the lives of young people with disabilities in Ghana will require the integration and implementation of strategies focusing on the de-stigmatisation of mental health issues, including psychiatric illnesses and intellectual disabilities (ibid.).

Furthermore, it is thought that current religious practices by certain groups may be promoting this culture of intolerance, through the perception that disabilities represent a curse. In 2017, 16 youth were discovered at Nyakumasi Prayer Camp in shackles because of perceived mental disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Practices of abuse and discrimination can result in religious groups ostracising persons with disabilities, who then become further isolated from the greater community. Many Ghanaian agencies are working to educate communities but the pervasive nature of these religious beliefs means the culture of intolerance remains widespread. Media partnerships with religious leaders could work to combat the stereotypes and prejudices the public hold (UN, 2006).

15.2.3 Inclusive education

The Inclusive Education Policy 2013 outlines strategies and goals for promoting more inclusive educational programmes, taking into consideration the integration of curricula content specifically made for children with special needs. MOE recommends training opportunities to equip teachers with the skills to instruct a diverse range of students, including adolescents and youth with disabilities, in order to ensure safe and inclusive environments. In addition, the Policy highlights the need for individualised support for youth with disabilities and accessible school infrastructure, and suggests the establishment of assessment centres across Ghana (urban and rural) and the transformation of special education centres to serve as

resource centres for youth with disabilities. Providing these supports to teachers and students will likely enhance the community participation of persons with disabilities while expanding their skills and capabilities.

15.3 Summary points

1. In 2006, Ghana introduced the Persons with Disabilities Act to protect the rights of Ghanaians living with disabilities.
2. The Act needs to address the implications of inaccessibility of public and government buildings, transportation, public facilities and services, and communication services and the intersectional dimensions of discrimination that result from limited access to housing, civic participation and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.
3. The definition of disability in the Act must be expanded to include visual impairment and mental health.
4. The Inclusive Education Policy outlines strategies and goals for promoting more inclusive educational programmes.

15.4 Recommendations

1. The Persons with Disability Act of 2006 must be amended to better ensure legal protection against direct and indirect discrimination as well as to expand the scope of the definition of disability to include those with visual impairments and mental health challenges.
2. Educational campaigns (including with the media) to combat the culture of intolerance towards young persons with disabilities could lead to significant change in communities for persons with disabilities, particularly in rural areas.
3. Development of baseline infrastructure for persons with disabilities is critical, including medical infrastructure at the community level, to ensure young persons with disabilities are receiving a base level of support in a consistent manner throughout Ghana.
4. Governing bodies should work to address the obvious gap in legal protection for young women with disabilities; recognition of the multiple forms of discrimination facing women and girls with disabilities is a priority.
5. Teachers should be equipped with the skills and strategies required to provide effective academic and social education to all students, including those with disabilities.

References

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