

Barriers in reporting of sexual violence against women with disabilities in Ashanti region of Ghana

^{1*}Maxwell Peprah Opoku, ²Nicole Huyser, ³Jonathan Kwame Mensah, ¹Michael Amponteng

¹Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Center for Disability Rehabilitation Studies
Department of Community Health, School of Medical Sciences, Kumasi-Ghana

²VU University, Faculty of Behavioural and Movement Sciences, Department of Movement sciences, Amsterdam-Netherlands

³Offinso College of Education, Department of Education, Offinso-Ashanti, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Despite the need to report incidents of sexual violence, there is a high rate of unreported cases in almost every community worldwide. Therefore, the aim of the study was to examine the extent of reporting of sexual violence against women with disabilities as well as the barriers limiting their ability to report. The study was an exploratory research which adopted a qualitative method of data collection. In total, 41 participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The study found that almost all women with disabilities did not report sexual violence perpetrated against them to any legal authority. Even those who reported either informed a family member or trusted friend. Barriers such as poverty, lack of bond with family and friends and communication difficulties, limited the ability of victims to report abuse they have suffered. The condition of women with disabilities will make it impossible for them to report abuses committed against them. It is important for reward packages to be made available to women with disabilities who boldly report abuse committed against them. Also, there is the need for awareness campaigns to urge families and communities to accept women with disabilities and provide them with their needs. This will protect them from people who will trade assistance for sexual favours.

Keywords: Women with disabilities, sexual violence, barriers, reporting, law enforcement

INTRODUCTION

Every individual, whether male or female, is susceptible to vulnerability. However, the high rate of vulnerability among women is undeniable.¹ By nature, most women are vulnerable due to inequalities and concentration of power in masculinity. The gendered society has distinguished women and men based on unequal power distribution.² Due to their disparate societal status, women suffer most in the midst of a crisis because of their limited access to capital, services and legal access. Women are procedurally and systematically sidelined in most societies. Most often, the legal jurisdiction is unfavourable to women as they face limited access to employment and even paid lesser when employed.^{3,4} Women live longer than men but their later

years have been equated to suffering and poor living conditions which is an expression of historically and culturally specific values and standards that are executed through many social and political institutions.^{3,5,6}

Although all women are at risk of violence, women with disabilities have been found to be at higher risk of physical and sexual violence.⁴ Women with disabilities faces dual discrimination which put them at risk of sexual violence, exploitation and maltreatment.^{6,7} Prevalence of sexual violence among women with disabilities is higher than non-disabled women.⁷ In a five year study in Canada by Brownridge⁸ found that out of over 20,000 women with disability who took part in the study, 60% indicated that they had been abused sexually in the past compared to 20% women without disabilities who indicated the same in a similar study. Disability increases the chance of individuals to be assaulted because of high tendency for them to be isolated with less resources for them to live on.^{4,7} Women with disabilities are at risk of sexual abuse due to their powerlessness to resist advances by perpetrators; easy to manipulate especially in the case of women with behavioural disorders as well as those with communication barriers who were found highly at risk and likely not to report barriers due to

*Corresponding Author:
Email: abizep4@yahoo.com

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their inability to share experiences.^{8,9} In a similar study, Davis⁹ confirmed that women with disabilities especially intellectually disabled become easy targets when it comes to sexual violence. Despite the high risk of vulnerability and likelihood of not reporting among some disability groups, there might be some factors likely to limit the ability to report.

Reporting crimes to appropriate legal authority such as sexual violence is contingent on the individual decision and choices. However, the ability of victims to report facilitates both their physical and mental recovery.¹⁰ It is essential that perpetrators of crime are made to face the full rigor of the law.¹¹ Perpetrators of sexual violence are likely to repeat it on other persons.¹² In a study by Keener¹⁰ found that perpetrators of sexual violence are likely to commit the same offence either on another person or the same victim. Hence, reporting will help protect others thereby making the society conducive environment for all persons. One way of mitigating sexual violence is for victims to report to appropriate legal authority in order to make sure offenders are punished for their crime.^{11, 13}

Despite the need to report incidents of sexual violence, there are high rates of unreported cases in almost every community worldwide.¹⁴ Sexual violence is among the most unreported cases in the world. In most cases, sexual violence is not reported to law enforcement agencies.¹⁰ In America, 14% to 32% of the incidence of sexual violence are ever reported.¹³ For instance, a national crime victimization survey by the US Department of Justice found that 32% of sexual violence were reported to police in 1994.¹¹ A similar study by American National Institute of Justice¹³ found that from 1992-2000, only 36% of rape cases were reported; 34% of attempted rape cases and 26% of sexual assaults were reported. In Ghana, a study by Cantalupo, Martin, Pak & Shin¹⁵ discovered that out of every three women who has been physically or sexually assaulted, only one reported. Most victims prefer to report to family and friends than seeking redress from the criminal justice system. On the other hand, one-third of women who have suffered sexual violence did not report to anyone.^{12, 14}

Interestingly, perpetrators of sexual violence are usually known to their victims but reporting such persons means cutting the supply and source of livelihoods.^{9, 16} The chances of women with disabilities to escape abuse is limited due to the fact that resources to enable them to live independently were mostly controlled by their abusers. These include medical equipment, finances, assisting to access essential services and even interpreters.⁵ A study on potential identity of sexual violence between 1994- 2000 in Texas and Kansas states in America found that 77% of offenders which ranged from friends, relatives, tenants, former boyfriends, were known to their victims.¹² Persons with disabilities are usually rejected by family members and neighbours giving them no choice than to live a lonely life without any assistance or support. Besides, people in most communities and even neighbors are uninterested about the plight of persons with disabilities denying them the opportunity to share their experiences.^{7, 9} In a study by Keener,¹⁰ police and opinion leaders were found not to

take women with disabilities serious in the event of reporting incident of sexual assault and molestation because of stereotype perception that they are crazy and idiots who are unable to reason as any other person. Hence, abusers of these vulnerable people are usually unpunished as the society will find it hard to believe they were victims, thus, forcing the latter to endure pains in silence.^{10, 16}

Sexual violence against women with disabilities has received little attention among scholars in Ghana. It is unknown whether women with disabilities report issues of sexual violence perpetrated against them. Therefore, the study intended to ascertain the extent to which women with disabilities report an incidence of sexual violence and whether they inform law enforcement agencies. The study provided an insight into the barriers to reporting of sexual violence perpetrated against women with disabilities. It was important that the opportunity to be given to victims to share their experiences.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This is an exploratory study which adopted qualitative methods of data collection, face-to-face interviews, to obtain data from study participants. According to Brown,¹⁷ exploratory research throws more light on a problem which has not received much attention of researchers and policy makers. Since studies on sexual violence against women with disabilities are limited, it was important to study in this area, in order to provide insight into the nature of the problem for further study.

Sampling Techniques

The study adopted non-probability sampling methods, that is, purposive and snowball sampling in recruiting study participants from the population. In the first place, since the study was focused on women with disabilities, the researchers recruited participants who fell in that category to be part of the study. The researchers were helped by the municipal executive of Ghana Society for the Physically Disabled, Ghana Association for the Deaf and members of the Ghana Blind Union who provided a list of members who were contacted by phone and asked if they will be interested in taking part in the study. Also, some of the women directed the researcher to other women with disabilities who were also contacted before they were enrolled in the study. In total, 41 participants from four different disability groups (intellectually disabled, physically, visual and hearing impaired) were interviewed.

Study Area

Mampong municipality is one of the 30 administrative divisions in Ashanti region of Ghana. The Ashanti Regional Capital is located in the north-east of Kumasi. According to 2010 Population and Housing Census, the population of the municipality was estimated at 88, 051 with 53.5% females and 46.5 males. According to Ghana Statistical Service, 2.4% of the population in the district is living with a disability. Of the disabled population, 49.2% were employed; 2.7% were unemployed and 48% were inactive. Among employed persons with disability, 52.5% were males and 46.5% were females.¹⁸

It is among the few districts in Ghana where the population of females with disabilities were found to be higher than their male counterparts justifying the necessity for such a study to be conducted in the area.

Study Population

The study population included all women and girls with disabilities in Mampong municipality. This ranged from those having physical, visual and hearing impairment as well as intellectual disability.

Data Collection

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews in order to obtain information from participants. A semi-structured interview guide was developed which was used to guide discussions during the interview session. Because of the sensitive nature of the study topic, the interviews were held without any family member or neighbour around to listen to the conversation. The interview questions were based on the objective of the study which was to ascertain factors accounting for sexual violence against women with disabilities. Some of the issues discussed included; whether participants have been sexually assaulted, circumstances leading to the incident, actions taken after and the consequences of the abuse. The interviews were mostly conducted at the homes of the participants or near their working place. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded. All participants spoke in the local language which is Twi except hearing impaired participants who used sign language. An interpreter translated the sign language by voicing into an audio recorder. In addition, caregivers of intellectually disabled women spoke on their behalf since they could barely recount what has happened to them due to their low intellect. Three of the researcher who are native Twi speaker translated the interviews into English.

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted the interviews in the Twi language which is the local language of the people in Mampong municipality. This was recorded with permission from the study participants. The audio-recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The researchers listened to each audio recording several times before transcribing. After the transcription, the researchers read through the write-up in order to be familiar with the pattern of responses which helped to create a picture about the trend and the analyses. While reading through the scripts, similar codes were assigned to familiar ideas and response. According to Gläser and Laudel,¹⁹ “the function of codes is to indicate what is talked about in a segment of text as it supports the retrieval of text segments, which in turn can be used to group them according to thematic aspects of the data they contain.” Afterwards, similar codes were grouped together into categories which were further linked together by themes. Associated themes were re-aligned in order to simplify the analysis. This made it easier for the researchers to come up with a summary of the findings.

Ethical Issues

Ethical clearance was obtained from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology’s Institutional Review Board before the fieldwork. The researchers respected the rights of the respondents and ensured that written informed consent was completed before carrying out any interview.

RESULT

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Study participants		
Physically impaired	10	24.4
Visually impaired	16	39
Hearing impaired	9	22
Intellectually disabled	6	14.6
Membership of DPO		
Yes	26	63.4
No	15	36.6
Marital status		
Single	22	53.7
Married	6	14.6
Divorced	13	31.7
Age		
11-20	10	24.4
21-30	13	31.7
31-40	8	19.5
41-50	5	12.2
51-60	3	7.3
61-70	2	4.9
Education		
Primary	12	29.3
Secondary	7	17.1
University	5	12.2
No formal education	17	41.5
Employment		
Students	5	12.2
Traders	9	22
Restaurant operators	3	7.3
Teachers	2	4.9
Civil servants	1	2.4
Unemployed	21	51.2

Table I summarizes the demographic characteristics of study participants. On the type of disability, most participants (39%) were visually impaired while only 14.6% were intellectually disabled. Also, the majority of the participants (63.4%) were members of Disable Peoples’ Organizations (DPOs) In relation to marital status, more than 50% of participants were single

while only 14.6% were married. With regards to age, most participants (31.7%) were between 21-30 years compared to 4.9% who were between 61-70 years. On education, more than 40% of participants had never been to school before while only 12.2% had completed university education. Moreover, more than half of participants were unemployed compared to less than 3% who were civil servants.

Victims of Sexual Violence

Table 2: Sexual violence per disability group

Variable	Frequency	%
Victim of abuse (n=41)		
Yes	28	68.3
No	13	31.7
Abuse per disability (n=28)		
Intellectually disabled	5	17.9
Visually impaired	10	35.7
Physically impaired	6	15.6
Hearing impaired	7	25.0
Offender known to victim (n=28)		
Yes	22	78.6
No	6	21.4
Others abused (n=13)		
Yes	9	69.0
No	4	31.0

Participants were asked whether they have suffered or heard about sexual violence against women or girls with disabilities in their respective communities. Almost all participants confirmed that they had either been victims of sexual abuse or heard about other disabled peers who had become victims. On the number of participants who have been victims, over 60% confirmed suffering abuse at any point in their life. Almost all participants who had been abused knew the persons who offended them. The offenders were mainly friends, teachers, neighbours, co-tenants and close family members. Table 2 below summarizes the number of participants who have become victims of sexual abuse.

Some participants recounted their experiences and circumstances leading to such abuse.

About four people have forced me in and had sex with me in my own room. They came as friends and when I was alone

in my room, they forced me. Because I am visually impaired, they just bumped into my room and forced me. I was helpless and couldn't resist or call for help since my sister and all the children were not around during the day [Visually impaired 1].

I have been forced three times by two different people. The first one, the person asked me to come and help him and doing that, he had sex with me. We were staying in the same house. He was a tenant. The second person invited me to come for some shoes. And he took me to his room and tied my hands and legs to have sex with me [Physically impaired 2].

I have been raped twice. Eight years ago when I was twelve years; the first one was a senior student and the second one was a teacher. The teacher closed the door, so I couldn't escape.

And for the boy, there was a toilet and he locked the door so I was not able to escape [Hearing Impaired 3].

Several participants (61%) also said that they had not been sexually harassed but they have heard stories from their other women with disabilities from their communities who have become victims. Some shared their experiences as follows;

One of my friends told me she has been raped several times by her own uncle. She is always home and not working so the man comes back from work and force her when no one is home. It has been going on for a long time but she don't trust anyone that is why she confided in me as a fellow disabled person [Visually impaired 7].

When we (participants sharing meeting experience) go for meetings, we hear some stories about some women who have been in such a situation based on their disability. People take advantage of them based on how they are. Their disabilities have made them vulnerable to exploitation by others [Physically impaired 4].

Reporting sexual exploitation and abuse

Participants were asked whether they reported in the event of sexual abuse. It emerged that most (75%) participants preferred not to report an act of sexual violence against them. Even those who reported either informed a family member or a friend without taking the right legal action. Most (80%) participants had knowledge about the existence of police stations where they could lodge complaints about the law to take its legal course but preferred either not to tell anyone or choose to inform a close friend or relative. Some participants said as follows;

I was unable to report or tell anyone. We (disables) are not respected in societies and most people are not interested in our well-being. I was a bit shy because they regard me as a sick person in this community and I didn't think I will get support from this community if I had pursued this case [Physically impaired 6].

I did not report it. I don't think it is serious that is why I did not report it. I think if the person is not injured in the process there is no need to report. If there is no injury there is no reason for us to report since it will be difficult getting evidence to support what you are saying [Physically impaired 4].

We (a caregiver explaining why the family didn't report) did not report it because it was people who were reporting to us. It is not necessary to report since we have not seen it ourselves. We were not seeing it ourselves but other people were reporting to us. Based on that we cannot report it based on hear-say. But before we realized she was pregnant and if we report, there wouldn't be anyone to cater for the child [Caregiver 1].

Some other participants (35%) explained that they informed closed relative and the issue was settled between the families amicably without resorting to due process. Others (18%) also mentioned that their relatives asked them to keep it as a secret without telling anyone.

I informed my mother and she approached the man who raped me. She informed him that I am and the man agreed to take care of me and the baby. So that was the end and nothing

was done about it again. We didn't report since there was no one to take care of me if he is imprisoned [Hearing impaired 1].

They (participant's family members) told me to keep it as a secret. They told me: You should keep it as a secret, you should not tell anybody. They said it will disgrace the family so I shouldn't tell anyone and I respected what I was told to do by not telling anyone [Visually impaired 2].

I informed my brother who is a soldier. He came and we went to inform their family. All they did was to apologize and we accepted the apology. They gave us a goat and some money to buy drugs for her when she is sick. We didn't go to the police to report [Physically impaired 4].

Barriers to Reporting

Participants were asked about the reasons why they failed to report sexual abuse to legal authorities in order for the laws of the land to deal with the perpetrators. It emerged that poverty, limited access to legal offices, language and communication barrier, lack of education, lack of bond with family and friends were the main factors which limited the ability of participants to report the incidence of sexual violence and abuse.

Poverty

Almost all participants (81%) discussed that poverty was a major factor limiting their ability to lodge a formal complaint to the legal authorities. According to them, they were not working and it was difficult for them to approach law enforcement agencies considering their present economic circumstance. Some participants narrated as follows:

I am not having money and to be able to go to the police station, I have to pay for my means of transport. Also, when you go to the police station they will ask you to bring the witness. All of this involves money and I am not having money that is why I have not reported such incident [Visually impaired 3].

The problem is that most of us (women with disabilities) are not working so it won't be possible for us to go to the police to lodge a complaint. The police take the money and I had no money for transportation to the place. I'm always at home and it's people who have to cater for me [Physically impaired 5].

There are others who are disabled who are not working (participating explaining why it is easy for women with disabilities to be abused). So it will be difficult for them to get money. When they want to go to the police station they need to hire a car for the police to come and arrest the persons since the police always say their car is spoilt. If you do not have all these means, they can't do that. So that is why the financial aspect is a barrier to us [Physically impaired 9].

People tell me (caregiver sharing what she hears from people) that people are forcing her (intellectually impaired) to have sex with her but because of our financial situation, we cannot report it. So the people come by and apologize and we accept the apology. We can't compete with others who are working who can bribe even the police to have their way [Caregiver 1].

Additionally, other participants (19%) discussed that their families are unable to support them to report incidents of abuse against them because of limited funds. It emerged that families

have limited resources for disposal and also they see reporting as a waste of time and resources.

We (participant's family) are not rich. I come from a poor family where those who cater for me are farmers. That is why we have to allow the person to go free. There is no money and at times what to eat is a problem for us. We had to let the person go free since we couldn't afford the up and down movement. God will punish him for me [Hearing impaired 2].

You have to find someone who will help you financially to lead you in order to get justice. Because in reporting it to the police, they will ask for money because you have to give money to the police for their transportation to arrest the person. I don't have such persons in my family [Visually impaired 4].

Lack of financial resources means lack of justice for victims. Their inability to afford their transportation and other potential cost which they have to settle serve as a barrier to reporting of sexual violence.

Inaccessible Justice System

Several participants (60%) discussed the justice system is not accessible to them. It came out that there were restrictions which limit the ability of women with disabilities to have access to the justice system of the country. Participants discussed that the transport system serves as a barrier to them to have access to justice. The discussions revealed that transport operators discriminate against passengers with disability limiting their free movement.

The means of transportation is our problem in this community. The car that will transport me to a police station will charge me higher fees. Some drivers don't even want to pick a disabled person. Our movement is very restricted due to the way drivers discriminate against us [Physically impaired 1].

I can't go to the police station to report because the trotro (commercial vehicles) will not pick me. They pick others and leave me behind. They tell me there is no space for me and my wheelchair. It discouraged me from going to lodge a complaint with the police [Physically impaired 4].

Other participants mentioned that the lack of police station in their community was a major barrier limiting their ability to notify law enforcement agencies. They were unable to travel for a long distance so the absence of a police station nearby means their inability to reach them so as to inform them their ordeal. Some participants share their experiences as follows:

We (the community) don't have a police station here. I'm blind and there are people taking care of me. They have to go to work in order for us to get food to eat. They can't leave work and follow me to the police station in the next town. What are we going to eat if they have to follow me every day to see the police? [Visually impaired 3].

It is far to get to the police station. She can't sit for long because of her condition. When the man raped her, we considered all these factors and left the matter to rest. I wish we could have gone to the police so that he can be punished by the law but we couldn't look at the circumstances [Caregiver 1].

Additionally, several participants (32%) discussed that there were so many delays and corruption which demotivated them to

report crimes committed against them. The following quotation summarized the views of participants:

The police are so corrupt that they can take the money and tell you to forget about the issue. Look at me here! I don't have any money to give to them. There is no way they will listen to me. I pray to God that such an incident doesn't happen to me again because I can't trust the police to help me get justice [Physically impaired].

If something like that happens and you go to the police station, they will frustrate you and it will get to a point that you have to forget about it. Every day they will tell you to go and come back. The police in this community are not helpful at all [Visually impaired 1].

Communication and Language Barrier

Several participants (45%) discussed that their inability to communicate with their parents and even police officers serves as a barrier when it comes to reporting sexual violence. Most participants especially hearing impaired and intellectually disabled women were found to not have reported abuses against them because of their inability to communicate. Almost all hearing impaired participants (20%) who have been abused mentioned that most people including their immediate family members do not know sign language and as a result they could not report what has happened to them. The following quotations summarize experiences of participants:

The boy saw me and he tried to talk to me but I was not able to speak. So when the boy saw that I am deaf that is why he did that to me. I explained it to my grandmother but she did not understand. She doesn't know sign language so I couldn't tell anyone up to today [Hearing impaired 3].

We (hearing impaired) have a problem. When I went to the police station, they couldn't understand me because none of the policemen knew sign language. I tried to explain it to my parents too but they didn't understand. I have not been able to report any of the men because of the language barrier [Hearing impaired 4].

One problem is that our (hearing impaired) parents in the house don't know the sign language. So if I go out and someone abuses me sexually, I can't explain to them. They don't understand the language which makes it difficult for us to communicate freely [Hearing impaired 5].

Other caregivers of intellectually disabled women (15%) discussed that their inability to speak or give an account of what has happened to them restrict their ability to report such incidents. Participants shared their experiences as follows;

My daughter can't speak well so if you go to the police station and the persons who have been raped can't speak for herself, they won't take us seriously. That is why I went to their family and settle it among ourselves [Caregiver 4].

She is not wise enough to even tell us what happened to her. It makes it difficult for us to pursue such an issue since the victim can't defend herself when she is called to do so. Unless we (family) catch the person ourselves, while in the act, we can't report to anyone [Caregiver 2].

Lack of Bond with Family and Friends

Lack of good relation with family and friends emerged as one of the barriers limiting the ability of persons with disabilities to report sexual abuse. Disability is unwanted in most families and this affects the relationship between the individual and his or her family. Some participants (40%) confirmed that they were rejected by their families due to their disability and this contributed to their violation. Participants shared the experiences as follows;

When I was going to school, I was close to my mother. When someone proposed to me or said something to me, I would go to my mother and she would confront them. Since she died, I don't have anyone to talk to and I have been staying alone. That is why I wasn't able to report [Physically Impaired 1].

There are some people with disability who can't even walk, they are always in their room (participant sharing experiences of others). There is a woman, who is my friend, who is just there. She has been sitting up for the past six years and there isn't a family member around. Something like that happened to her but she couldn't do anything about it [Physically impaired 6].

There are some people whom their families have abandoned them and they just roam about (participant recounting why others were abused). They (those abandoned) become the people who can be easily be targeted. That is what happened to a friend of mine. She was abandoned without a place to sleep. Some guys came and force her at night while sleeping in front of a shop [Visually impaired 3].

Since I became disabled, all my friends have left me. I don't have anyone to talk to, so if there is something bothering me, there is no one to share with. You can easily inform them about what is going on in your life for them to help you solve the problem [Physically impaired 2].

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of the study was to examine the extent of reporting of sexual violence against women with disabilities as well as analysing the barriers limiting their ability to report such violations. The study found that most women with disabilities failed to report sexual violence perpetrated against them to appropriate law enforcement authorities in the country. Even the few who reported either inform relatives or friends without channeling their grievance to legal authorities in order for the law to deal with the offenders. Factors such as poverty, injustice and corruption, communication and language and lack of bond with family members were found to be the main barriers behind the high rate of unreported cases of sexual abuse. The findings of the study were consistent with other studies on sexual violence against women with disabilities.^{3, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14}

Not only women with disabilities abandoned by family and society, most of them are not working because of their inability to have access to education.²⁰⁻²¹ The study found that most participants were unemployed and were usually at home during the day. Lack of access to employment means their dependence on others limiting their ability to raise additional income for other needs. Hence, in the event they are sexually abused, they might be unable to raise money to report such offenders to law

enforcement agencies. They are probably concerned with bread and butter issues than seeking justice of the law. Due to this, cases of sexual violence might be settled between families of the offender and the victim as payment of compensation to the latter becomes an issue at stake. Their continuous survival might discourage them to report and also settlement between families may enable victims to recoup some money from offenders for personal upkeep. This finding corroborates with studies by Kabee³, Brownridge⁸ and Du Mont et al.¹⁴ who discussed that high rate of poverty among women with disabilities makes them powerless to report abuses committed against.

The nature of the disability was found to be a barrier limiting the ability of women with disabilities to report sexual abuse committed against them. The study found that disabilities such as communication and cognitive disorders mostly restricted victims' from reporting sexual abuses committed against them. In relation to hearing impaired victims who mostly communicate using sign language, were largely unable to share their experiences since most people in their respective communities were unable to understand or communicate with them. Their inability to talk as any other non-disabled persons affects their chances of reporting sexual violence they have suffered.⁹ It is possible that parents and families might show less interest in the well-being of their children, thus, do not make any effort to learn their language so as to communicate freely with them and know their problems. Similarly, the inability of women with cognitive disabilities to give an account of what happened to them renders their families powerless to pursue cases of sexual violence committed against them. It is possible that offenders who sexually abuse such individuals are likely to go scot free since their victims might not tell others. This finding validates studies by Brownridge⁸ and Davis.⁹ They found that both women with intellectual and hearing disabilities were at high risk of sexual abuse due to the nature of their disabilities which limits their ability to communicate.

In most developing countries, access to justice is usually problematic because of unfair distribution of resources.¹⁵ In the same way, it is possible that some communities might not have access to law enforcement agencies such as police post and even law courts. This means that people living in such communities have to move to distant communities in order to be able to access such services. With lack of support from families together with high rate of unemployment among persons with disabilities, it might be unlikely for them to embark on such a journey to seek justice. The visibility of corruption and bureaucracy in legal systems has contributed to the inability of victims from poor families to get justice. The affluent and well-resourced always have their way as they can buy justice.¹² The low public confidence in the police and legal system may provide enough basis or justification for victims not to approach such institutions. It is not surprising that 34 high court judges, 22 magistrates and over 100 police officers and court clerks across Ghana were caught on camera by an undercover

investigate journalist selling justice to enrich themselves. This will likely discourage the poor from seeking justice.²²⁻²³

IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of the study found that all women with disabilities were at risk of sexual violence and there were barriers limiting their ability to report sexual violence in order for the laws of the land to deal with offenders. The study, therefore, has implication for policy making. In the first place, there is the need for awareness campaigns urging families and communities to accept and support especially women with disabilities. Media campaigns and outreach programmes will help in reaching large segments of the society. Additionally, it is important that parliament passes legislative instrument (LI) which will give full meaning to the Disability Act 2006. According to the Act, it is a crime and punishable by law for families to abandon their members with disabilities so in the event that an LI is passed, families will be forced to cater for their disabled members and this will help in reducing risk of women with disabilities to sexual violence.

Moreover, it is essential that incentives are provided to women with disabilities who were able to report sexual violence against her to the appropriate legal authority. Since most women with disabilities are poor, it is essential that financial rewards are given to those who step forward to report such violations. Also, it is important that women with disabilities are trained to acquire vocational skills such as making of shoes, clothes, catering and others to enable them to have regular source of income. Furthermore, there is the need for support services for parents and caregivers of persons with disabilities. This will enable them to acquire communication and better ways of handling their children. In addition, there is the need for nationwide campaign and fight against corruption in the judicial arm of government and the security services so as to restore public confidence in these institutions.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study found that almost all women with disabilities chose not to report sexual violence against them. Besides, those who reported either informed a family member or trusted friend without recourse to the laws of the land. The study further found that factors such as poverty, inaccessible justice system, lack of bond with family and friends and communication and language barriers were found to be the main reasons limiting the ability of women with disabilities to report incidents of sexual violence which they have suffered.

Women with disabilities will forever be unable to report sexual violence against them unless they are empowered to do so. It is important that appropriate measures are to be put in place to encourage women with disabilities to report sexual abuses they have suffered. For instance, institutionalizing financial rewards for women with disabilities who are able to report violations perpetrated against them. Also, the passage of legislative act that will give legal backing to the Disability Act will make it mandatory for families to support their members with disabilities.

It is worth noting that the study focused on only accounts by women with disabilities and it will be appropriate for future studies to involve officials of the judiciary and police service in order to ascertain measures put in place to help safeguard the rights of women with disabilities.

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