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The study found that AAU remains far from satisfying visually challenged female students for academic success as it has not yet established a structure to assist them; for not only failing to develop mechanism of checking their academic achievement but also failing to develop the university community to excel assistance to the students.

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Academic Challenges of Visually Challenged Female Students in Addis Ababa University Ethiopia

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The study found that AAU remains far from satisfying visually challenged female students for academic success as it has not yet established a structure to assist them; for not only failing to develop mechanism of checking their academic achievement but also failing to develop the university community to excel assistance to the students. As females have special needs to be met, so are visually challenged female students as compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, the university should develop viable structures to extend special assistance pursuant to their special needs.

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I. Background of the Study

a) Introduction

The principle of inclusive education was first internationally recognized and endorsed in 1994 at the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain to encouraged governments to design education systems that respond to diverse needs so that all students can have access to regular schools that accommodate them in child centered pedagogy (UNESCO 2005).

However, it was the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 that established inclusive education as a mechanism to deliver the right to education for people with disabilities (Stubbs 2008). In Article 24, the CRPD stresses the need for governments to ensure equal access to an "inclusive education system at all levels" and provide reasonable accommodation and individual support services to persons with disabilities to facilitate their education. The CRPD underscores the rights enforced by other international laws related to education for all, focused on disability, while outlining how these obligations might be met by governments to provide inclusive, quality and free education to all. This commitment also implies that high-income countries should support low- and middle-income countries' efforts through their development assistance.

According to estimates of World Health Organization (WHO), 10 percent of world populations are persons with physical disabilities (WHO 1981 cited in ENDAN 2011). Similarly, evidences indicate sizable numbers of people with physical disabilities in Ethiopia. According to 2007 census, out of 73.7 million people, 805,492 people with physical disabilities are found in Ethiopia (CSA 2007). Notwithstanding this, many agreed that the number of people with physical disabilities in the country constitute 10 % of the total population while still others also suggest their number to goes beyond 10 % given the country's long lasted civil war and poverty (Institution of the Ombudsman 2010).

Ethiopia has constitutionally approved, signed and ratified many international agreements and conventions pertaining to all people with different disabilities in which visually challenged female students are part and parcel. Ethiopian constitution under proclamation number 1/1995 article 41 (5); federal civil service proclamation number 262/2010 article 13 (4); employer and employee proclamation number 377/2011 under article 29 (3); and proclamation on employment rights of peoples with disabilities under proclamation number 568/2008 articles 2 (5), 4 (1 & 3), 6 (1 & 2) & 7 (1, 2, & 12) declared that within the permissible possibility of national economy of the country, the government will take rehabilitative and supportive measures to take care of people with physical and mental disabilities (ENDAN 2011). More specifically, Ethiopian higher education proclamation number 40 (1-4) clearly indicated the support systems and services to be provided to persons with disabilities in all HEIs operating in the country.

In Ethiopia, fewer than 3% of children with different disabilities have access to primary education and access to schooling decreases rapidly as children move up the education ladder (MoE 2010).Being Visually Challenged[1] (VC), as one form of disability, adversely affects students' educational performance.

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While it can be caused by many factors, being VC is a stressful physical condition with profound social and emotional implications for the individual, the family and the community. Consequently, while VC persons are one of the most vulnerable sections of any society; VC female students (VCFS) face 'double' challenges in successfully achieving their studies as compared to their male counterparts.

b) Statement of the problem

Girls, females and women experience age-old limited roles and restricted opportunities in any society. However, the question of their equal participation in all aspects of life, and mainly in the educational sector is globally growing concern so as to boost successful overall development. Students with disabilities are the most recent marginalized group to move toward equal opportunity in education following low-income persons, racial and ethnic minorities, and women (The Institute for Higher Education Policy 2004).To solve these problems, today, education is increasingly being recognized as "a fundamental human right" all individuals are entitled to enjoy irrespective of their living experiences(UNESCO 2012).

Like many countries of the world, Ethiopia has constitutionally approved, and signed and ratified many international agreements and conventions pertaining to people with different disabilities in which VCFS are part and parcel. Viewed from educational sector, encouraging attempts are underway in terms of ensuring inclusive education at all levels of the educational system. Accordingly, article 40 (1-4) of higher education proclamation of 2009 explicitly indicates the obligations of higher education institutions (HEIs) to relocate classes and develop alternative testing procedures; provide different educational auxiliary aids and academic assistance (including tutorial sessions, exam time extensions and deadline extensions); and make building designs, campus physical landscape, computers and other infrastructures taking into account the interests of physically challenged students within the permissible capacity of their resources.

In spite of such provisions, academic challenges of Students with Disabilities (SDs) surface across all universities of the country, in which Addis Ababa University (AAU) is not an exception. As a result, VC students, like other SDs, face acute academic challenges. The problem for VCFS surfaces even more, as an age old extension of the harsh reality and gender inequalities that continue to primarily disadvantage women in the contemporary world. This has led VCFS in higher education to face multiplicity of problems that obstruct from successful achievement of their career.

While studies on academic challenges of VCFS in Ethiopian higher educations', if any, are little, gender sensitive supportive system for them as one category is not yet thought by the government. The supportive systems and mechanisms in AAU to solve the problem are not yet well built, nor did the awareness of university community reached as expected. Affirmative action for VCFS is cloaked under affirmative action of SDs. Cognizant of such realities, this paper specifically focused to examine, understand, and explore academic challenges faced by VCFS in AAU.

c) Objectives of the study

Generally, this study aims to explore the level of vulnerability of VCFS in AAU by assessing support systems accruing to them vis-à-vis the breadth and depth of support systems and services, students levels of satisfaction and the level of congruence of support with statements of higher education proclamation (2009) and other laws and conventions. More specifically, this study is aimed to:

- Assess the types and nature of support systems provided to VCFS in AAU.
- Determine VCFS levels of satisfaction to the services& support systems provided to them.
- Determine the level of gender sensitivity of services and support mechanisms.

II. Methods and Materials

a) Study area

The study was conducted in AAU, sadist kilo campus, which is the oldest HEI in Ethiopia both in its establishment and admission and graduation of students with different disabilities in the country. It is located in Addis Ababa, the capital city and political and economic center of the country. Because of critical time constraint, the study site, AAU, was purposively selected due to its proximity for the researcher, large concentration of students with disabilities (SDs), and longtime experience of the university in enrolling students with disabilities.

b) Sources of data

Data for this research were primarily collected from primary sources i.e. in-depth interview of 30 VCFS and observation of services utilized by them. Attempts to obtain secondary data on the proportion of all visually challenged students in general and of female VCFS in particular in AAU was failed for neither the registrar has the data nor the officer of the disability center of the university was willing to give information despite the repeated contacts made by the researcher. The officer's response of saying I am ill while at the same time speaking of her being busy was really embarrassing.

[1]Visually challenged persons are those with temporary or permanent, partial or full physical, psychiatric, intellectual or sensory impairment that confines their ability to execute one or more fundamental activities of everyday life.

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c) Research design

This study employed cross-sectional design and qualitative data collection tools. Qualitative method was chosen to get in-depth understanding of the lived experiences & challenges more specific to VCFS and to allow them broadly and freely express their views.

i. *Techniques of data collection*

Data were collected using in depth interviews and observation techniques. In-depth interview was conducted to elicit information on the overall support, its systems and mechanisms made by the university to VCFS, their levels of satisfaction on the supports and services they obtain, and challenges and opportunities of such supports systems and mechanisms from emic perspective. In addition, observation of their reading rooms in the library, Braille materials, computer services and other facilities meant for visually challenged students in general was made.

ii. *Sampling population*

For this study, VCFS were purposively selected with the rational of assessing whether there exists'double challenge' for academic success, and gender sensitive support systems for VCFS in the university and how VCFS manage to cope if such systems are not in place.

Accordingly, while simple random sampling was used to select 8 VCFS, it was supported by purposive sampling to select respondents with three or more years of stay in the university with the rational of obtaining adequate and detail information. Respondents were limited to 8 owing to page limitation of the assignment and the saturation of data to the needs of the researcher.

iii. *Theoretical perspectives on education*

Though many sociological theories can help explain disadvantaged position of female students in general and of VCFS in particular, Structural Functionalism and Conflict Perspective were utilized for the purpose of this paper.

Structural Functionalism stresses the key role of educational institutions to the stability, integration and the conflict-free existence of the modern society, and provides the poor with the opportunity for changing their position and environment by providing access to scarce resources. It thus, views that education fulfills the functions of cultural transmission, socialization, social control, transmission of academic knowledge and skills relevant in the society. In this regard, VCFS should obtain appropriate care, assistance and motivation not only to play their part but also to benefit from it in the process.

Unlike to structural functionalism, conflict perspective, perceives the educational system as an instrument of securing power and privileges in modern society. And education is an instrument to maintain inequality that exists in a given society by supplying students with cognitive, intellectual, and technical skills required by the capitalist class. It is thus, an instrument of the elite domination, and subordination of those (such as women, people with disabilities) who have less opportunity and access to it. In this regard, while historically perpetuating gender gap in the educational sector in general vividly indicates low educational access and success of females, absence of gender sensitive support systems and service provision for VCFS continues to perpetuate their vulnerability.

d) Ethical consideration

Due to the insensitive nature of the subject, informants were asked to provide verbal consent after briefing them about the objectives of the study and the intimate nature of interview questions. They were further informed confidentiality of information they provide, and assured to refuse to answer any question should they feel uncomfortable. In addition, all of the participants were interviewed in convenient places selected by them. Moreover, after completion of the interview, the researcher has sponsored refreshment services though some of the interviewees were unable to participate.

III. Results

To enrich the findings of this study with prior works accessible published and unpublished materials were reviewed. However, the scarcity of reading materials on the issue of the thesis has to be mentioned as a limitation. Though there was difficulty in getting adequate literatures to see different views on academic challenges of VCFS, the accessible scripts were assessed. The issues entertained in this chapter are: The development of inclusive education from historical Perspective; Educational rights of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia and Theoretical perspectives on education.

a) Background information

Data for this research were collected from 8 respondents, with the exception of one, all of whom have stayed three or more academic years in AAU. Time duration taken during in-depth interviews varied based on the expressive abilities and detail knowledge of respondents and ranged from a maximum of one and half an hour to a minimum of 30 minutes. The interviews with 6 respondents' were undertaken in their reading rooms in Kennedy library, four consecutively one day and the other two at another day (next day). The other two respondents were asked while they were returning from class two days later and interviewed in the field in front institute of Ethiopian studies (in the recreational place locally known as 'beg tera').

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All interviews were conducted solely by the researcher in Amharic (national language of Ethiopia) so as to make communication easier; recorded with the consent of informants and then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. The transcribed data has been categorized according to the themes and then analyzed manually using contextual and thematic analysis and discussed by triangulating against the findings from literature review. Finally based on the implications of the findings, conclusions and recommendations have been drawn. The following results were obtained and all the names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

The findings of the study were discussed by categorizing them into the following three themes: Characteristics' of respondents; academic challenges vis-à-vis supports they have experienced and obtained from AAU; and their views of awareness of university community, their levels of vulnerability.

b) Characteristics' of respondents

In order to discern the impacts of departments, family background, their type of visual challenge, religious, and social factors on academic success of VCFS, the collected data depicted the following results.

Department wise, all the 8 respondents were drawn from four departments: Ethiopian languages and literature (3 students, all 3rd year (graduating class)); law (2 students, (3rd and 5th (graduating) year)); social work (2 students, 3rd and 4th (graduating) year) and sociology (1 student, first year). Age wise, 3 respondents are of age 24; 2 aged 23 and the remaining three have ages 22, 25 and 26. Religiously, 5 are followers of Orthodox Christianity while the rest 3 are Protestants. Their family background also shows that except two, all the respondents have urban family background. Five respondents who are able to remember the proportion of VCS in their class reported to be 18:46; 13:35; 28:50; 13:65; 3:80.With respect to their visual challenges, half of the respondents have impaired depth perception while the rest have reported of having low vision.

c) Academic challenges VCFS have experienced vis-à-vis supports they obtained from AAU

Half of the respondents have reported the commencement of their challenges while they are enrolled into the university. Accordingly, four of them were not initially enrolled in their first choice, AAU. While one has been enrolled in Bahir Dar University, the remaining three have been enrolled in Hawassa University. All of them, however, have managed to change their placement to AAU by requesting the center for national examinations and certification. However, all the interviewees, with the exception of one, have reported of joining the department in their first choice.

Viewed from department wise, findings show that students and instructors of only the school of social work are reportedly found to be exemplarily helpful. In this school, all visually unchallenged students of third year and fourth year have developed regular programs/schedules to help VCS of their class. VCFS who participated in the interview from other departments have also witnessed this practice and the willingly support of students of the department for them and some of the VCS they know.

On the other side, while poor willingness to cooperate is found roughly across students of all other departments, one student from school of law has reported of joining to the department without her will and her inability of changing to the department of her interest (i.e. social work) because of unwillingness of officers in the registrar to cooperate. She blames of them for making her pay one year price (as she has been withdrawn on probation for a year) and of dean of the school for discarding her eligibility to take exam while she has reportedly brought legal receipt of sick leave for the case she had left exam room, while having attempted some questions, because of illness. With the exception of one student from the department of law who managed to secure help from others because of her special interactive quality, and two students from school of social work, the remaining five students have reported their difficulty to make use of help from their classmates, reasoning that students do not want to interact in helpful way despite they make greetings.

From instructors' side, all the interviewees from four departments, with the exception of school of social work, have reported of not seeing special assistance offered by instructors for VCS in general and of VCFS in particular. Some of them have suggested that the existence of one cooperative instructor cannot encourage them to say there is promising support. On the contrary, 5 interviewees in all departments except the school of social work, have blamed their instructors for not being forcing visually unchallenged students upon their request of not interested to do group assignments with VCSs in general and VCFSs in particular.

Overall evaluation of the university by all the interviewees in terms of its sensitivity to respond to the needs of VCS, and VCFS; designs of buildings, roads and other infrastructures; computer services, and other financial and non-financial support systems is fair and below fair. Some of their reasons for reporting this include the following:

Financial support of the university is extremely low (i.e. 120 Birr per month) which is extremely far from being enough for them to pay for readers while studying & during mid and final exams let alone for purchasing some sanitary materials which are provided of free in some other universities (example Hawassa University) as two interviewees have indicated. This finding is consistent with the assessment conducted by the

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institute of the Ombudsman (2013) which found out that for the question asked to know whether sanitary materials were given, 58.34% have said no while 41.66% have not provided the answer. It is also consistent with the same finding which commented that while it is being governed by the same legal framework, AAU, unlike Hawassa University did not financially support the expenses given for readers of visually challenged students mentioning a gap in awareness. Computer services are also reported to be of acute scarcity. All of the respondents have reported of having neither reference nor teaching materials of relevance written in Braille. They also have aggressively expressed the existence of some Braille references, in very few departments, which are of little, if any, relevance for current knowledge and technological advancement. A quote taken from one of the interviewees shows their deep challenge as it can be seen as follows:

> *Really there is little concern for VCS; while there are outdated reference materials in Braille showing the concern in some remote past, today, we are unable to get even limited but timely Braille reference or teaching materials. Because of this, we cannot get library pockets so as to borrow books, while visually unchallenged students can easily do; there is no a system of using limited Braille materials turn by turn, as a result of which one who get in the first time can use it the whole day and night… it is within such system we are learning and competing with others with no problem of vision in AAU. She added, being female, it is far more challenging to stay overnight there to solve the problem and not easy to ask males for help.*

This is also consistent with the finding of institute of the ombudsman (2013) which indicated the existence of limited references for SDs and stated such limited materials were concentrated in the school of law instead of being fairly distributed to other departments.

All of the interviewees have also blamed the University for replacing the provision of cassette with digital recorder recently. According to the interviewees, this was not need based. A similar view of three different interviewees on the issue was quoted as follows:

> *All VCS need cassette for not only using it at a later time (i.e. even after graduation), but also to give it for different individuals who can help us by recording simultaneously. Digital recorder can be useful for those who have personal computer (i.e. rich student or student from rich family); if we were rich, we should not have nagged for everything. Many of VCS have learned in boarding schools which definitely outstrip AAU in their treatment, support and service provision. Why the concerned bodies do not consider the needs of VCS. What will happen for a poor VCS who may have lost his digital recorder either from himself or because of he/she gave for someone volunteer to help in recording? Many of us are begging for different people to help us during exam time.*

d) *Interviewees views on awareness of university community& their levels of vulnerability*

Mixed responses were obtained with respect to the views of university community as reported by the interviewees. While 2 have reported extreme cases of being bored to communicate VCS by some officers have said their awareness to be low and the remaining one has said as fair. These responses can be attributed to their intensity of visiting offices.

With respect to their levels of vulnerability, all female students reported of believing their being at disadvantageous position as compared to their male counterparts with visual challenges. They have cited uneasiness of their interaction with clever male students, less access and utilization of technologies, and absence of some forms of gender sensitive support systems. This finding, too, has some consistency with the finding of institute of the ombudsman (2013) which indicated unfair financial support of the university for all citing the same support provided for individuals with one finger and the one who uses wheelchair.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

The interviewees overall evaluation of support systems and services provided by the university is found at maximum to be fair (2 reported it as fair and 4 as poor and 2 as extremely poor). This indicates the existence of wide gap to meet the demands of VCFS in AAU. The school of social work is found to be exemplary in terms of help both students and instructors of the department provide for VCS in general and VCFS in particular. This practice need to be strengthened and expanded toother departments of the university.

All the interviewed VCFS have reported of their more disadvantageous position than their male counterpart VCS. This gives a hinge to conduct another study to validate the case so that gender sensitive support systems can be put in place if it is confirmed. This can better help to redress specific challenges of VCFS.

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