

## Gender justice and social inclusion of female learners with dwarfism: A case study in Bindura District, Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

This study explored social exclusion challenges experienced by female secondary school learners with dwarfism in Bindura district, Mashonaland Central province, Zimbabwe. The qualitative study used a case study research design. The study's participants were two learners with dwarfism, two administrators, four teachers, and 12 learners (who are not dwarves but attend classes with the learners with dwarfism). The participants were purposively selected because of their experiences with the phenomenon under study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Findings revealed that learners with dwarfism have problems that begin as a result of their small stature, socially constructed as a disability by society. Other challenges include inappropriate infrastructure and furniture, stigmatization, and segregation in sporting activities. However, female learners with dwarfism face peculiar challenges because of their gender. These challenges include sexual harassment and the burden of stereotyped feminine chores in the school. The findings revealed that gender and disability remain exclusionary, and oppressive systems that affect the schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism disproportionately. The study recommends that schools adopt an inclusive education policy that addresses issues of exclusion based on gender and disability.

### Keywords

Disability, dwarfism, gender, inclusive education, stigmatization.

### INTRODUCTION

Dwarfism, socially perceived as a disability, remains a challenge for learners, particularly those of the female gender. The phenomenon of dwarfism can be defined as a condition of individuals with a height of 4 ft 10 in, or shorter owing to various complex medical or genetic conditions. However, this study argues that it is culture that saturates the particularities of the bodies with meanings that can be socially constructed and classified as either able-bodied or disabled and explores the significant

consequences of those meanings on the schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism in the Bindura district.

In Africa, dwarfism has always been socially and culturally perceived as an impairment. To this end, cultural construct of dwarfism makes it a case of disability. It goes with stigma. Stigma is a socially constructed frame through which physical disabilities are conceptualised and then branded as different and subsequently devalued. Although dwarfs belong to the minority group in



society, they remain part of humanity and therefore entitled to fundamental rights [1]. Dwarfism, within the context of disability discourse, borders on the twin concepts of identity and stigma [2]. The experiences of people with dwarfism can be understood within the social model of disability, highlighting how public spaces in UK can be disabling for individuals of extremely short stature [3].

Stigmatisation of women with disability tends to be exacerbated by stereotyped perceptions on femininity. Women with limb deficiencies, for instance, have often been constructed as negatively ‘other’ compared to able-bodied women and, therefore, perceived as requiring material restoration through prostheses—even when they may actually feel more comfortable with their bodies [1]. Such practices not only construct the impaired female body as ‘lacking’ in comparison to able ones, but also teach women with impairments to loathe their bodies and selves [2]. Gendered experiences of secondary school learners with dwarfism have remained understudied. Literature shows that the ‘dominant discourse of dwarfism is centred on entertainment where it tends to create and promote problematic stereotypes of dwarfism [1], [2], [4]. This study takes a different dimension by exploring how such stereotypes of dwarfism affect the schooling experiences of female secondary school learners.

A report by UNICEF [5] reveals that everyone has the right to inclusive and equitable quality education as espoused in SDG4. For some, this right is curtailed by socially constructed gender norms and expectations that are as arbitrary as discriminatory. Gender norms and power relations must be dismantled to make any real difference to the opportunities for all children and young people in their diversity [6]. By extension, the study adopts an intersectional approach that seeks to understand the learner’s complexity and not as a singular identity or category [7], in which case the identities involve gender and disability. Intersectionality refers to the understanding of barriers faced by the most marginalized and the use of this knowledge to actively address their challenges.

Public spaces including schools tend to be oppressive and exclusionary for people living with a disability. This understanding of how buildings, and the facilities within them, disable people with impairments reflects a social model understanding of disability. Spaces are

‘statuarized’—in other words, designed for people of average stature—resulting in dwarfs experiencing these spaces differently [8]. In the same vein, disabled spaces, which do not adequately accommodate various impairments, result in disabled people still struggling for better physical access [2]. This shows that the implementation of disabled facilities and spaces is unlikely to be accessible for various impairment groups, thus leaving them in a disabling situation. Further, observations show that disabled spaces and facilities have been designed and implemented with a narrow conception of what disability is and thus do not fully accommodate the needs of dwarfs [4]. In developing countries like Zimbabwe, infrastructure development remains a serious challenge, let alone infrastructure suitable for people living with disability. To this end, Pritchard further argues that because dwarfism is not a common impairment and its identity as a disability is often contested, the implementation of spaces and facilities suitable for dwarfs will be minimal, if not entirely ignored [2]. The spatial practices of little people are influenced by the relationship between their extremely short stature and the everyday spatial routes and networks, which are designed to be navigated and negotiated by individuals of average height [8]. Against this backdrop, the secondary school infrastructure under investigation can be disabling for learners with dwarfism.

Gender stereotypes and dwarfism (perceived disability) serve as barriers that hinder full participation in school for female learners with dwarfism. Thus, disabled women struggle with both the oppression of women in male-dominated societies and the oppression of being disabled in societies dominated by able-bodied people; hence, some feminists argue that the oppression of disabled people is closely linked to the cultural oppression of the body [9]. According to the Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action of Special Needs Education [10], the fundamental principle of inclusive schools is that all children should learn together regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. This study explored the interplay between dwarfism (a disability) and gender stereotypes as factors that can mediate the exclusion of learners with such a condition. It can be observed that women with disabilities live with two ‘minority’ identities, a double dose of discrimination and stereotyping, and multiple barriers to achieving their goals

[11]. The Salamanca Framework explicitly states that inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity, as well as the enjoyment and exercise of human rights [10]. The social model of inclusive education suggests that barriers to learning and participation are created by society and constructed to serve the interests of the majority, thereby limiting accessibility to others [12]. The Social Model thus frames disability as something that is socially constructed. Disability is created by physical, organizational, and attitudinal barriers, all of which can be changed or eliminated. In the same vein, it can also be argued that the social construction of identity creates a situation in which bodies that are categorized as both female and disabled are doubly and in parallel [11]. By extension, learners with dwarfism may be stigmatized by society because of their gender and stature, and such tendencies constitute barriers to accessing education by such learners, particularly in inclusive schools. Thus, it is critical to understand how experiences of disability and the social oppression of the disabled interact with gender stereotypes. Thus, this study explores the circumstances of female learners with dwarfism in mainstream schools to establish the extent to which the two factors (gender and disability) tend to work together, creating gendered barriers to learning as a result of the socially constructed meanings attached to the disabled bodies by society.

This study explored social exclusion challenges experienced by female secondary school learners with dwarfism in Bindura district, Mashonaland Central province, Zimbabwe. Dwarfism is a very rare human condition; hence, cases of learners with this condition in schools are also extremely rare. Nevertheless, the fact that such learners exist justifies the need for a study to explore the challenges faced by such learners and, more importantly, the gender dynamics involved therein. The experiences of learners with dwarfism remain understudied, yet dwarfs have problems that begin as a result of their small stature, which is socially constructed as a disability by society. This study argues that female learners with dwarfism tend to face more challenges in education because of their small stature and cultural gender stereotypes. This study proceeds by exploring the background literature and the theoretical framework. It states the research questions to be answered in this study. The discussion of findings is preceded by

a detailed research methodology. Finally, conclusions and recommendations are made based on the results.

### Research questions

The study sought to answer the following question: (RQ1) What are the gender stereotypes associated with female students with dwarfism in secondary school?; (RQ2) How do such gender stereotypes affect schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism?; (RQ3) What measures can be implemented to improve the social inclusion of female learners with dwarfism?

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, guided by the interpretivist paradigm, to explore the lived experiences of female secondary school learners with dwarfism. This approach facilitated the process of collecting, presenting, and analyzing data on their experiences. It also enabled an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions [13], on the nuances and complexities of students with dwarfism.

### Research design

The study adopted a case study design and utilized one secondary school in Bindura District with two learners (one female and one male) with dwarfism as a case study. Patton [14] defined a case study as a research strategy and an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. It is based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group, or event to explore the underlying causes and principles. The case study research design was the most suitable for this study because it allowed an in-depth exploration of the experiences, attitudes, perceptions, and dynamics of female learners with dwarfism in mainstream classes.

### Participants

Twenty participants (name code: P1–P20), including two learners with dwarfism, two administrators, and four teachers who had taught learners with dwarfism, and 12 learners who had shared classes with learners with dwarfism participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify participants. Purposive sampling aims to identify information-rich sites [7]. The

two (female and male) learners were selected on the basis of their lived experiences with dwarfism. The four teachers who had taught the dwarf learners for the longest time were also selected. The head and his deputy were selected

by virtue of their experience as administrators who handle learners' complaints and problems. Lastly, the 12 (six males and six females) learners are not dwarfs but had shared classes with dwarf learners for the longest time.

Table 1. Demographic data of participants

Code Name	Sex	Age	Education level	Position	Code Name	Sex	Age	Education Level	Position
P1	M	36	Tertiary	Head	P11	M	16	Form 3	Student
P2	F	40	Tertiary	D/Head	P12	M	15	Form 3	Student
P3	M	28	Tertiary	Teacher	P13	M	15	Form 3	Student
P4	F	29	Tertiary	Teacher	P14	F	16	Form 2	Student (dwarf)
P5	M	27	Tertiary	Teacher	P15	M	14	Form 2	Student
P6	F	26	Tertiary	Teacher	P16	M	14	Form 2	Student
P7	M	18	Form 3	Student (dwarf)	P17	M	14	Form 2	Student
P8	F	15	Form 3	Student	P18	F	14	Form 2	Student
P9	F	15	Form 3	Student	P19	F	14	Form 2	Student
P10	F	15	Form 3	Student	P20	F	14	Form 2	Student

### Research instruments

Data collection instruments in the form of in-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions were used to generate data on the experiences and challenges of female learners with dwarfism. In-depth interviews sought in-depth information on the interviewees' feelings, experiences, and perceptions of a given social phenomenon [7], [15], allowing for the collection of critical data on the experiences of secondary school learners with dwarfism. Two focus group discussions with six participants each were conducted with students in Forms two and three. Each group comprised of three boys and three girls. The research instruments were pilot tested to ensure dependability and trustworthiness.

### Data collection procedure

The interviews with administrators and teachers were conducted in English, while FGDs were conducted in Shona—the language best understood by the research participants. The FGDs were tape-recorded, but in cases where participants refused to be recorded, detailed notes were taken instead. The tape-recorded data were transcribed and translated into English.

### Data analysis

The collected data were presented as direct narratives under emerging themes and corresponding research questions. This study adopted an interpretive analysis model that helped establish emerging patterns or themes from the collected data. The study therefore

utilised a thematic approach. A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions [14]. In this regard, data were grouped according to a research question, simultaneously creating a theme. Interpretive analysis is the process of closely examining data to identify constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied [7], [16]. Thus, data were presented as emerging themes, and the social model of disability, combined with the feminist perspective on disability, was adopted to illuminate the experiences of female learners with dwarfism.

### Ethical considerations

First and foremost, permission was sought from District Education Officers to gain entry into the schools. The researchers ensured the protection of participants' dignity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms when reporting findings. Additionally, they obtained participants' consent after explaining the purpose of the study and the duration of the interviews. Consequently, only those who consented were interviewed.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and analyzed under the specified emerging themes. The findings show how gender and disability as socially constructed identities work together to signify relations of power between men and women in school and society at large. To understand the

interplay between gender and disability in constraining the learning experiences of female learners with dwarfism, there is a need to engage in gender transformative lenses. Gender transformative education completely transforms education systems by uprooting inequalities [5], [6].

### Challenges of learners with dwarfism

The findings of the study reveal that the challenges faced by learners with dwarfism take a gender trajectory, as female dwarf learners tend to be sexually harassed by male learners who take advantage of their small stature. This section addresses (RQ1): What are the gender stereotypes associated with female students with dwarfism in secondary school? The following quotes illustrate the above.

*P14: Some male students take advantage of my stature and are in the habit of lifting me and in the process deliberately caressing my privates. When I came here last year I found that there is a guy doing form 3 who has a similar condition as mine. Some students were in the habit of dragging me saying come and meet your husband. In worst scenarios during break time they would force me lie down and then place the guy on my lap. Or worse still they would force us to kiss each other. As they did so, they would be yelling on top of their voices playing with us like we were their toys. I nearly dropped out of school but one good teacher intervened and saved the situation.*

P7 the male student with dwarfism echoed the same sentiments.

*P7: When the other learner with a condition similar to mine joined this school other learners teased me saying my wife had come. They would encourage me to fondle and caress her in their presence. I have fought with them several times over such harassment but since I reported the practice to the teacher, the tendency is now rare as some learners received counselling from the teacher.*

As mentioned, P14's situation tends to be compounded by stereotypical perceptions of femininity. P7 reveals:

*P7: Unlike P14, because she is a woman, I have learnt to defend myself. Whoever teases me and tries to harass me I use stones to attack them. I have learnt to be assertive and many students now know that I do not tolerate abuse and harassment. Despite my stature, people must respect my rights. Because I am a man I will fight for my rights.*

The allocation of duties in school takes a gender dimension, and P14's circumstances tend to be exacerbated by stature. Class monitors allocate cleaning duties equally among girls, and P14 often tends to be overwhelmed by her share of the duties. She reveals:

*P14: Despite my condition, I am allocated equal cleaning duties with other girls in our class. Where other girls take 30 minutes to finish a task, I will need more time to finish the same task. In such weeks when I am on duty I go home a bit late leaving me with no time to study or do my homework.*

These sentiments reflect deeply entrenched gender stereotypes in secondary school learners' experiences with dwarfism. The self-esteem, motivation, confidence, and academic performance of female learners with dwarfism tend to be compromised by two overlapping factors: gender and dwarfism. In this regard, some researchers have argued that disabled women suffer more than disabled men from the societal demand for 'ideal' bodies, as patriarchal cultures tend to judge women more by their bodies than men [9], [17]. By extension, gender and disability remain intertwined, exclusionary, and oppressive systems that affect the schooling experience of female learners with dwarfism. In this regard, a report by UNICEF and España Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia [10] revealed that Gender Transformative Education becomes the solution as it seeks to transform stereotypes, attitudes, norms, and practices by challenging power relations, rethinking gender norms and binaries, and raising critical consciousness about the root causes of inequality and systems of oppression.

Many studies have shown that girls tend to be vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse in school settings [18]–[20]. In African societies, male and female sexuality tend to be constructed by the definitions of masculinity and femininity [21]. Thus the social construction of identity creates a

situation in which bodies that are categorized as female and disabled tend to be disadvantaged doubly and in parallel. Such perceptions tend to mediate the abusive tendencies of other learners over those of female learners with dwarfism. To this end, gender transformative education becomes imperative and indispensable because it addresses the social structures that cause discrimination and inequality, going beyond the classroom into communities [10], [11].

This study argues that the circumstances of a girl child with dwarfism tend to be exacerbated by her stature, as she may not be able to defend herself against violence by other students because of her gender and stature. According to the social model of inclusive education, barriers to learning and participation are created by society and constructed to serve the interests of the majority [11]. As a result, gender transformative education becomes useful, as educators adopt an intersectional approach that seeks to understand the learner in their complexity and not as a singular identity or category. It transforms education systems by uprooting inequalities entrenched not only in schools but also in society [6], [22]. The study established that despite his condition, the male learner with dwarfism has been assertive and bold, as he rejects. Although he is also a victim of stigmatization because of his stature, his masculine attributes prevent further harassment because patriarchal orientation has taught him resistance and assertiveness. By being assertive and bold, male learners with dwarfism reject the perceived social identity of dwarfism as a disability and demand respect for their human rights. This observation confirms the argument by some feminists that disability is not a biological given; like gender, it is socially constructed from biological reality [9], [17]. Thus, the gendered nature of disability becomes an issue that mediates the differential schooling experiences of female and male learners with dwarfism.

Another challenge bedeviling female learners with dwarfism is the allocation of duties for learners in the school. The allocation of duties in the family tends to take a gender-biased trajectory, because certain duties are constructed by the definitions of femininity and masculinity [23]. It can be observed that disabled women are in a relatively more disadvantaged position than those with disabilities [17]. In the same vein, women with disabilities live with two 'minority' identities: a double dose of discrimination and

stereotyping that mediates multiple barriers to attaining their goals [11]. Such perceptions tend to permeate schools and influence the gender typing of duties. By implication, female learners tend to be affected by the social construction of femininity, which prescribes domestically oriented chores at school for girls. For female learners with dwarfism, her circumstances tend to be worsened by her stature, particularly her small limbs, which makes it very difficult to finish the chores assigned to her on time. Many times, she takes longer to finish her tasks and arrives home very late, leaving her with no time for self-study or even homework. Against this backdrop, the study argues that the intersection of gender and dwarfism tends to negatively affect the schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism.

Learners with dwarfism experience many challenges at school; however, the challenges become gendered because of societal stereotypical perceptions of femininity and masculinity. During a Focused Group Discussion with female learners, it emerged that other learners laugh at learners with dwarfism openly and look down upon them, and such behavior makes them feel uncomfortable. Such bullying tends to affect self-esteem, confidence, and motivation for female learners with dwarfism to participate in the class. Findings in this section address (RQ2): How do such gender stereotypes affect schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism? The school head confirmed that learners with dwarfism were subject to bullying by others.

*P1: Learners with dwarfism experience bullying from other learners because of their stature. We have tried to educate our students that dwarfism is just but a condition, otherwise learners with a such a condition have feelings, intellectual capacity as well as rights just like them. As of now bullying cases are declining though I must admit that the female learner with dwarfism is the worst affected.*

The female learner with dwarfism detailed her experiences at school during an interview.

*P14: When I was in form one, I was given demeaning nicknames like, "dhafu, dhunda", "mandiorepi". Because of my stature, some students have a tendency of lifting me up and throwing me on the ground. In the process,*

*some boys deliberately caress my private parts. When in class, I wish to write on the chalkboard but I fear my peers will laugh at my height. So I choose to just sit and let them do all the practice on the chalkboard.*

Focus group discussions confirmed that learners with dwarfism faced serious challenges. In a classroom setting, when it comes to class activities such as writing on the board or erasing it, most learners take turns performing these duties. However, P14 never attempts to erase the board or solve any mathematical problem on the chalkboard because she is often booed due to her height.

The male student had this to say during an interview.

*P7: Whenever I try to volunteer to solve some problems on the board, my class mates will always say back off, you are too short, do you think you can write anything up there? This is despite the fact that I always suggest that if I stand on a chair or table I should be able to write on the board. Even though some students attempt to boo at me, I make sure that I participate in class. I am not discouraged because I know that I am better than most learners because I am always in top ten in terms of academic performance.*

An interview with a teacher who teaches both learners with dwarfism reveals:

*P3: Learners with dwarfism face challenges in walking long distances to school. Some parents because of fear for bullying, would rather keep them indoors and protect them from suspected bullying from other students along the way. It becomes even worse if the child with dwarfism is female, she is constrained by the facts that she is female with a disability. This may explain why there are only two learners with dwarfism at this school.*

Juxtaposing the responses of the two learners with dwarfism, it becomes apparent that gender dynamics tend to compound the circumstances of female learners with dwarfism. For women, the status of 'disabled' compounds their status of being 'female' to create a unique kind of oppression and this suggests a layering of discrimination onto a female body exposing it to

gender based violence [3]. The male student makes an effort to challenge the status quo and seeks alternatives to actively participate in class, while his female counterpart resigns herself to failure, passively complaining about how she is bullied by other learners. Thus, it can be argued that masculine or feminine orientations in African societies tend to shape the self-perception of learners with dwarfism. The assertive and aggressive approach of the male learner with dwarfism reveals a stereotypical masculine character, despite his stature. By implication, the interplay between gender and dwarfism can further compromise self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and ultimately, the academic performance of female learners with dwarfism through bullying. Demographic data show that learners with dwarfism are the oldest in their classes, confirming that they delayed going to school as parents tend to be too protective, especially for the girl child who delayed further by a year.

#### **Impact on female learners with dwarfism**

Similarly, findings in this section address (RQ2: How do such gender stereotypes affect schooling experiences of female learners with dwarfism Despite his condition, P7 tends to outperform many students because he is always among the top ten students in academic performance. His Mathematics teacher revealed:

*P5: P7 is one of the best students in Mathematics. Despite stigmatization by his classmates, he concentrates on his work and makes sure he masters concepts taught every day. He has confidence and participates well in class. However, I have noticed that he gets angry too quickly and is ever ready to attack when provoked.*

The same teacher had this to say about the academic performance of the female learner with dwarfism:

*P5: Unlike P7, P14's performance in Mathematics is not pleasing. Generally girls have a negative attitude towards Mathematics. P14's performance tends to be worsened by the negative perception about herself because of her stature. Because of negative labelling by her classmates, she rarely participates in class.*

It is clear that the interplay between gender and dwarfism tends to impact the schooling experiences and academic performance of female learners with dwarfism. Several studies have shown that stereotypical perceptions of femininity influence the academic performance of female children [3], [18], [24]. This study demonstrates how perceptions on gender combine with perceptions on disability to affect the schooling experiences of female students. However, for girls who have been given opportunities to participate in classes and practice concepts taught, their performance has been seen to improve [21]. For P14, it is a double tragedy, as she is often stigmatized because of her stature. To this end, it can be argued that no woman is simply a 'woman,' but rather is multiply identified across a spectrum of cultural categories, many of which are extrapolated from human physical differences [11]. By extension, the social construction of identity creates a situation in which bodies that are categorized as both female and disabled are doubly and in parallel ways [11]. Similarly, the prism of gendered locations and gender relations invariably refracts the forms and impacts of disablism [17]. Feminist scholars have shown that social processes that construct and shape gender and disability are closely interlinked. Such perceptions of the disabled feminine body tend to affect P14's self-esteem and motivation, which in turn worsen her academic performance. This study thus demonstrates how adopting gender-responsive pedagogies in the context of gender transformative education can address challenges experienced by female learners with dwarfism.

Sporting activities become a challenge for learners with dwarfism because of their small stature, and this becomes worse for the girl child as sporting activities remain gendered. Question 2 is further addressed. The following quotes illustrate the above.

*P6: Learners with dwarfism may want to participate in sporting activities but face exclusion because of height, such children may be good say at soccer but because of height and stature they fail to keep pace with other learners and may be physically injured. The exclusion is not deliberate though, it's not discrimination per se but there are no resources specially designed for them, for example in jumps or athletics. These learners*

*have short paces. There is no equipment designed for people as short as the dwarfs.*

In one focus group discussion, it was revealed that the male dwarf learner was very skilled in soccer and had crafty techniques. However, due to his height, he was not accommodated in the school team, as team members feared for his health, and teachers, as coaches, never attempted to include him, probably because he could not keep up with the pace of other learners.

Another teacher also echoed the same sentiments when she said:

*P5: She is not allowed in sporting activities although she is willing to, trainers fear for her safety. Again at first other learners failed to accept her as they laughed and teased her when she tried to join them in sporting activities.*

The two learners with dwarfism shared their sentiments regarding sporting activities:

*P7: I can perform much better in soccer than most learners here but our coach does not give me room for trial because he fears for my stature. The coach thinks I am weak and cannot compete in sporting activities of any kind because I can get easily injured and I cannot run as fast as fellow students.*

The female learner with dwarfism also concurred with her counterpart and said:

*P14: I am being isolated when it comes to sports. The coaches see me as weak to participate in girls' soccer. I have now settled for chess as my sport because in chess we don't use much energy.*

The teacher responsible for sports weighed in and said:

*P6: These learners are not strong enough to maintain the play of the normal learners. They are really weak despite the fact that they love sporting activities. We do not have small balls designed for them as these balls are too big for them. In any case, the small balls may not be liked by other normal students.*

During a focused group discussion one male student commented:



*These children are somehow too short and if the ball is kicked hard as is the case in soccer, they might end up being injured severely physically, so the best way is to exempt them from soccer training and participation in other ball games. More so, P7 cannot keep the pace with other learners.*

The physical stature of learners with dwarfism poses a major challenge to their participation in sporting activities. Sports as a place where physicality is admired has presented a challenge for disabled female athletes; their active participation in sports has appeared to be a contradiction [25]. They tend to lack the stamina required for sports such as soccer and netball. The balls are too large for their limbs, and they cannot keep pace with other players. It becomes even worse for the female learner with dwarfism because the scoring rings in the netball game are too high for her. Against this backdrop, the notion of inclusivity becomes a mirage because the infrastructure and sporting equipment are inappropriate for players with such a condition. Even if the infrastructure and equipment were appropriate, there are too few learners with such a condition to constitute a team.

### **Gendered perspectives in inclusive education**

With regard to inclusive education, many teachers felt that although there were challenges in integrating learners with dwarfism into mainstream classes, it was important to allow them to interact with other learners. In this section, (RQ3); What measures can be implemented to improve the social inclusion of female learners with dwarfism is addressed. The following quotes illustrate the above:

*P3: I have mixed feelings. First it is a noble idea because by mixing them it enables some learners to accept them as we are in one society. Mixing them also gives them a sense of belonging. They feel part and parcel of the society. However when students with such conditions are mixed in the mainstream, the facilitators of such institutions must create a conducive learning environment and safeguard their rights. Otherwise by mixing them without proper environmental and gender audits and adjustment we are actually excluding them.*

Another teacher concurred and elaborated:

*P4: Allowing learners with dwarfism to attend school on their own is tantamount to segregation and stigmatisation. They should join others in mainstream classes so that they do not feel lonely and rejected. It is important to belong to a group and have friends. However school authorities should not forget that learners with such a condition have specific needs like appropriate chair, desk, or toilet seat as well as sporting equipment.*

One female deputy head shared her sentiments:

*P2: Inclusivity is the way to go in education. However, as teachers we need to understand that historically the girl child has faced a myriad of barriers to schooling due to gender stereotypes. It only becomes worse for a female learner with dwarfism because of her condition which does not allow her to perform some of the duties expected of the girl child. Having said all this, it remains critical to have such learners in mainstream classes while teachers attend to their special needs because inclusive classes develop a sense of belonging in them.*

As mentioned above, the interplay between gender stereotypes and stigmatization as a result of dwarfism tends to affect the schooling experiences of the girl child with dwarfism. The findings of the study demonstrate how the phenomenon of dwarfism imposes physical limitations on school-related activities, creating barriers to participation and interaction with other learners in class. Such physical limitations, resulting from an excessively small stature, tend to attract stigmatization, which is further compounded by negative, socially constructed perceptions of femininity in African societies [21], [26]. By extension, hegemonic femininity consists of characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimize a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordinate position of women [27]. As a result of their small stature, learners with dwarfism tend to experience significant challenges related to learning resources such as furniture, stationery, and workboards, which are often inappropriate for

them. Under these circumstances, inclusive education has become a mirage for educational institutions with learners of dwarfism. Over and above these physical limitations, girl children tend to be overburdened by domestic chores at home as well as domestic duties at school. Her stature tends to limit her mobility and the pace at which she completes assigned tasks. Consequently, domestic chores at home often leave her with little to no time for homework or self-study. This study argues that dwarfism tends to impact female children more significantly than male children. Therefore, inclusive education curricula should take into account how gender stereotypes exacerbate the challenges faced by female learners with dwarfism. The circumstances for girl children with dwarfism tend to be exacerbated by stereotypical perceptions of femininity in African societies that relegate the girl child to the periphery of critical societal activities [21], [26], [27]. Such perceptions permeate the school environs, and the girl with dwarfism is not spared. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use, and partnerships with their communities [28]. Therefore, this calls for a gender transformative education system that takes cognisance of gender intersectionality and the unique circumstances of individual learners into account.

## CONCLUSION

The learning experiences of learners with dwarfism tend to be compounded by many challenges including inappropriate infrastructure and furniture. They tend to be stigmatized due to their small stature, and this stigma affects their self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and ultimately, their academic performance. A female child with dwarfism is particularly vulnerable, as gender stereotypes often contribute to sexual harassment and place an excessive burden on her through domestic chores. The study concludes that the complex interactions between gender and disability remain exclusionary and oppressive systems that significantly impact the schooling experiences

and academic performance of females with dwarfism.

Guided by the research findings above, the study recommends that in schools where learners with dwarfism are present, there is a need for accessibility audits to accommodate their needs. We therefore recommend a Gender-Transformative Education system that acknowledges gender intersectionality and the unique circumstances of individual learners. In the spirit of educational inclusivity, appropriate toilet seats, chairs, desks, workboards, and sporting equipment should be provided. To prevent stigmatization, other learners need to be educated that dwarfism is merely a condition; otherwise, these learners are human beings whose rights should also be respected. Most importantly, school authorities should identify and remove gender-based barriers because they tend to compose the circumstances of female learners with dwarfism. The study recommends a policy framework that proffers opportunities for social inclusion and inculcates tolerance of female learners with dwarfism in particular and disability in general. Such a policy framework should emphasize the principle of non-discrimination based on gender and disability. It must reference legal frameworks and ensure an inclusive curriculum that accommodates learners with disabilities while simultaneously challenging gender stereotypes. Teachers as curriculum implementers should be conversant with gender-responsive pedagogies and the provisions of the policy on inclusive education to minimize stigmatization, which comes about as a result of gender and disability as exclusionary variables. The study recommends longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of inclusive education for learners with dwarfism. Although the latent goal of inclusive education is to ensure equal access to education regardless of gender and disability, it inadvertently leads to social exclusion of learners with dwarfism. Some of the challenges experienced by female learners with dwarfism noted in the study include gender stereotyping and stigmatisation, sexual harassment, inappropriate furniture and infrastructure. Thus the intersection of gender and disability can significantly impact the schooling experiences of female students with dwarfism.

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