SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND IDENTITY MANIPULATIONS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN IKOT EKPENE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an examination of the social constructions and identity manipulations of persons with disabilities in rural communities within Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Phenomenology was adopted as a theoretical guide to properly situate the implications of social constructions of disability and identity manipulations of persons with disabilities in contemporary rural communities within the framework of the study. The study was limited to five (5) selected rural communities in Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area (Utu Edem Usung, Uruk Uso, Abiakpo Ikot Essien, Mbiaso, and Ikot Abia Idem). The sample size was 80 participants who were persons with different forms of disabilities and have been subjected to a series of inhumane treatments in the study area. The survey method with Rapid Individual Unstructured Interview (RIUI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) had been adopted and used. The data were analyzed using the qualitative approach. The results showed that persons with disabilities are being discriminated against more than persons without disabilities. The results also revealed significant research gaps and a lack of information that is easily accessible to the public. The core of this study is that a cost-effective strategy is needed to reach persons with disabilities in their communities. This approach makes use of existing community services and promotes inclusion rather than exclusion.

Key words: Social Constructions, Identity manipulations, Persons with Disabilities, Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area

Introduction

In most cultures around the world, disability is associated with wickedness, witchcraft, curses or taboos. These perceptions about disability vary within society, in small communities and within families. As a result, persons with disabilities in rural communities continually face stereotypes and deprivations. According to Drew (2023), these experiences are shaped by social and cultural contexts. Research on disability and culture as observed in Effiong & Ekpenyong (2017a) found that disability, like other identities, is socially constructed and misrepresented, as people with disabilities often define themselves not by their disability but by disablement in cultural contexts. In fact, different cultural beliefs and practices make defining a biological deficiency difficult. The World Disability Reports (2011) cited in Effiong, Mboho & Wordu (2018) confirmed further that the concept of disability evolves from culture to culture.

Studies in Nigeria, such as Effiong (2019), Effiong & Agha, (2020) and Effiong, Ekanem & Ottong (2023) noted the age-long prejudice and strong stigma around disability compelled many persons with a disability in major cities and rural communities in the country to rarely speak publicly about their experiences. However, in Akwa Ibom State, evidence and experience have shown that people with disabilities in most rural communities are often "forced" to disappear from the public sphere due to both physical and social barriers that preclude their integration and participation in the community (Effiong & Ekpenyong 2017b).

The attitude of people towards people with disabilities in most communities in Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area is based on their ideas about disability, as it is seen as a personal tragedy, something to be cured or prevented, a punishment for wrongful behaviour, or as an indication of the lack of ability to behave as expected. This cultural perception of persons with disabilities and their families often results in a diminished status in the community. They are at higher risk of violence compared to their non-disabled peers, and this is rarely taken into account.

Against this background, this study aimed to examine the social construction and negative identity of persons with disabilities to determine the social consequences of harmful cultural beliefs related to disability in Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area.

Literature Review

Magnitude of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria

In Nigeria, statistics on the number of people with disabilities are not consist-ent due to differences in classifying disabilities and determining which types of disability are included in surveys (Effiong & Ekpenyong, 2017a). This is because the World Health Organization in 2018 estimated that about 29 million of the 195 million people who comprise Nigeria's national population were living with a disability. On a similar note, the National Population Commission had in 2018, pegged the total number of people with disabilities in Nigeria at about 19 million and this puts the percentage of people with disabilities at 9.6 per cent approximately. Regardless of which estimate is closer to the truth, one is looking at the high incidence of disability in Nigeria. Empirical research by scholars in disability issues has shown an increase in negative attitudes, stereotypes, stigma and discrimination of persons with disabilities in many rural communities in Nigeria (Effiong et al., 2023; Effiong, 2019).

Cultural Influence and Disability Identity Development

According to Xu et al. (2024), literature on identity development largely comes from psychology and human development which focus mainly on the individual and their nuclear family. For individuals from marginalized groups, identity development is crucial. Through a sense of belonging to certain communities and feeling of individ-ual difference, people develop both their individual and group identities. Nevertheless, this feeling of belonging to the mainstream society, according to Forber-Pratt & Zape (2017), does not form a disability identity until the individual integrates with the disability community and recovers one's disability experiences and rejects the mainstream societal values that deny differences.

Empirical studies on disability identity development have revealed that perceived positive images of characters with disabilities are associated with the development of disabil-ity identity. Many disabled people see their disabilities as just another kind of medical problem, or as a cluster of special "challenges" to overcome, (Effiong & Ekpenyong, 2017a). Others experience

disability as an important part of their identity and feel how it shapes their beliefs, relationships, and place in their communities. They are often, treated as second-class citizens, shunned and segregated by physical barriers and social stereotypes.

Physically Impaired Persons (Disabled) and Cultural Beliefs

According to Effiong, Udousung & Udo (2018), people with physical disabilities are also referred to as the *'cripples'*, *'lame'*, *'handicapped'*, *'disabled,'* *'mbongo,'* and *'impairment'*. There is often some confusion when these terms are used interchangeably. Confusion also exists on how the terms are defined among others. One's disability and culture are central to determining the position or the status that the individual is given in a specific society. According to Eide & Ingstad (2011), cultural influences create much unhappiness and isolation, not just for the immediate family circle. These names are so derogatory and influence the identity of many people with physical disabilities in most rural communities in Nigeria.

Our negative or unhealthy cultural beliefs and attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities have contributed immensely to the seemingly appreciable number of people with disabilities we have in our society (Effiong & Ekpenyong, 2017b). They have been incorrectly understood, leading to negative perceptions and treatment. There are several beliefs for the negative attitudes revolving around people with disabilities in Nigeria. These beliefs cut across the several rural communities in Nigerian society (Effiong, 2019). The causes of such negative perceptions according to studies, such as related to a curse from God (due to gross disobedience to God's commandments), ancestral violation of societal norms (example due to stealing), offenses against gods of the land (example, fighting within the society), breaking laws and family sins (example, stealing and denying), misfortune (example, due to marriage incest); witches and wizards (example, society saw them as witches and wizards); adultery (a major abomination), a warning from the gods of the land (due to pollution of water and the land); arguing and fighting with the elders (a societal taboo), misdeed in a previous life (such as stealing), illegal or unapproved marriage by the societal elders (arguing and fighting against the elderly advice in marriage), possession by evil spirits (due to gross societal disobedience), and many others.

People with physical disabilities are socially constructed as asexual people and are often seen as not having or experiencing sexual needs or desires, (Drew, 2023). The social construction of people with physical disabilities as asexual, according to Effiong, Ekanem & Ottong (2023), further marginalizes them and constructs stereotypes about what it is like to live with a disability. The sexuality of people with disabilities is still taboo among people with all forms of disabilities, their family members, helping professionals, and society in general (Shakespeare, 2014). According to a systematic review of the sexual expression of people with disabilities, experiences of sexuality of disabled people are under-researched. Besides, most of the existing studies focused on heterosexuality and were done in Western communities (Campbell, 2017). Disability and sexuality studies have traditionally been dominated by the medical profession, where disabled people's sexuality is pathologized and understood as inappropriate and "fetishized" (Campbell, 2017). It is worth noting that sexuality is framed as a problem that requires intervention and that there is no room for the sexual liberation of persons with disabilities to make sense of their sexual experiences.

Hearing Impaired Persons and Cultural Beliefs

People with disabilities including those with hearing challenges are "the world's largest minority" and oftentimes, face intrinsic barriers to participation in all aspects of most rural communities of the world (Effiong & Ekpenyong, 2017b). These set of people are loosely labelled '*deaf and dumb,*' '*inan*' and the like. They are also referred to as '*hard of speech*', '*hard of hearing*', or '*people with hearing challenges among others*, depending on the nature of the disability. Disability is all too often represented in terms of sadness and despair, helplessness and hopelessness, and hence, appeals to charitable giving are based on such descriptions, (Effiong, Mboho & Wordu, 2018).

However, the deaf are seen and considered to be *"societal defaults",* because of their societal stands (Fafunwa & Aisiku, 1975), and thus, were perceived negatively and treated badly in some rural communities of the country. According to Coleridge (2000), no culture is inherently fairer than any other when it comes to defining the place of the deaf. Deaf people as a linguistic minority have a common experience of life. Identification with the Deaf community is a personal choice and is usually made independent of the individual's hearing status, and the community is not automatically composed of all people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Disability is a phenomenon created by society.

Visually Impaired Persons (Blind) and Cultural Beliefs

Most definitions of disability capture the fact that bodily impairment leads to disability, which is a social construct or a result of society's reaction to persons with impairment. Thus Effiong, Udokang & Udom (2023) stated that many impaired persons are so excluded and alienated from their society that they are no longer treated as respected 'citizens' of their society. Persons with visual disabilities may experience negative attitudes at family and community levels, including name-calling, negative beliefs, and misconceptions surrounding the causes of visual impairments (usually associated with religious or cultural norms and beliefs).

According to Vickers (2008), what constitutes a disability is to some extent culturally determined. These negative attitudes manifest in rejection, neglect, loss of respect, and denial of identity or self-worth, and often result in low self-esteem, depression and isolation. This, along with structural limitations and challenges, also reinforces barriers for persons with disabilities in accessing basic services such as education, health, public transport, and social safety nets. In other cultures, the will of God or Allah, karma, evil spirits, black magic, or punishment for sins may be seen as causes of disability. Some cultures freely combine traditional beliefs with biological models such as disease degeneration and dysfunction.

Intellectually Impaired Persons (Imbecile) and Cultural Beliefs

Many cultures have different definitions of this type of disability depending on the circumstances that led to their emergence in such cultures. Amongst the Annang culture, intellectually impaired persons are described with different names deriving from some ancestral cleavages, such as, *"essienemana", "akpaabot"* and the like. South Asian families with members with intellectual disabilities also report significant stigma and negative stereotypes within their communities (Mir et al., 2017), and this according to Katbamna et al. (2000) can lead to isolation and shame, emotional distress in individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families.

Most parents were aware of negative views within Pakistani culture towards intellectually impaired persons and felt that they had been excluded from their community. The families of intellectual disabilities who experienced increased shame and stigma were less likely to use services than others. In some rural communities, a new-born baby with a disability would be left in the wild to die, while some are ostracized or poisoned to 'maintain the dignity' of the clan or family. We watched them misbehave and rather labelled them 'witches' and excommunicated them instead of helping them. The worst thing that happens is when you take them to 'prayer houses' where they are immediately labelled 'witches' and their condition 'spiritual' and 'sacrifice-demanding'. The 'prayer houses' end up worsening the situation.

Bonk, et al. (in press) noted that disability, including intellectually impaired persons, is viewed as a tragedy, a disgrace, shameful, the result of sin, or a punishment from God. These sets of people are repeatedly seen as object of pity, which produce guilty feelings in their family members and associates. They are frequently seen as a burden to themselves, families and society. They are continually perceived to be useless and to behave in appropriate ways (Bonk et al. in press).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the assumptions of the phenomenological perspective based on the "social construction of disability" approach advocated by Mike Oliver in 1983. The approach argued that the issue of "disability" is a socially created problem as the consequence of social discrimination and exclusion of persons with disabilities. However, Oliver (1983) suggested that "disability" is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. Oliver did not want "social constructions of disability" to be a general theory of disability, but rather a starting point for changing the way society views disability.

It is a reaction to the dominant medical model of disability, which in itself is a functional analysis of the body as a machine to be fixed to conform to normative values. It identifies systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) as the main contributory factor in disabling people. Social constructionism as a theoretical framework suggests that various facets of social reality, such as concepts, beliefs, norms, and values are formed through continuous interactions and negotiations among society's members, instead of the pure objective observation of physical reality.

The theory posits that social constructs are collectively formulated, sustained, and shaped by the social contexts in which they exist. It significantly impacts both the behaviour and perceptions of individuals, often being internalized based on cultural narratives, whether or not these are empirically verifiable. The social model of disability further proposes that people can be disabled by a lack of resources to meet their needs. It focuses on issues such as the underestimation of the potential of people with disabilities to contribute and add economic value to society if given equal rights and suitable facilities and opportunities as others.

Conclusively, the approach averred that "*disability*" is a result of the interaction between people living with disabilities and an environment filled with physical, attitudinal, and social barriers, and therefore carries the implication that the physical, attitudinal, and social environment must change to enable people with disabilities to participate fully in the society on an individual basis with others.

The Study Area

Ikot Ekpene is known as *"Raffia City"* or locally as *"IK"*. It is one among the local government areas in Annang land. The cultural setting of Ikot Ekpene is not quite different from that of other Annang ethnic nationalities except with some uniqueness in interior areas, (Akwa Ibom State Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, 2011). The area under the British in 1951 was the first city in Nigeria to become the Local Government Area. It is a historic town in the South-South Zone of Nigeria, In Akwa Ibom State is located on a high way that parallels the coast, between Calabar to the South East and Aba to the West, with the State Capital, Uyo, on this road just to the East, Umuahia being the next major town to the North.

The Information Brochure (1994) revealed that Ikot Ekpene was the traditional headquarters of the Annang people in Akwa Ibom State. It was then known as Ikot Ekpene Region and was occupied by the British in 1901. It was a sub-division of the old Eniong District until 1914 when it became a separate district comprising the present-day Ikot Ekpene. According to Wikipedia, Ikot Ekpene under British providence was a Council County in Annang Division, and today, it is one of the urban centres in Akwa Ibom State.

Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area covers a total land area of 643,477 square kilometers and is characterized by a favourable climate and fertile soils suitable for agricultural production. The people of Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area communicate in the Annang dialect. They have a common culture. It is a fusion of cultural riches that combines the most typical features and traditions of sub-cultures of the inhabitants of this area. Currently, there are three (3) clans, eleven (11) wards, and forty-seven (47) villages governed by respected and recognized Chiefs/Heads with the Paramount Ruler, His Royal Highness Akuku Okon Udo Ukut as the Superintending Head supported by three (3) Clan Heads.
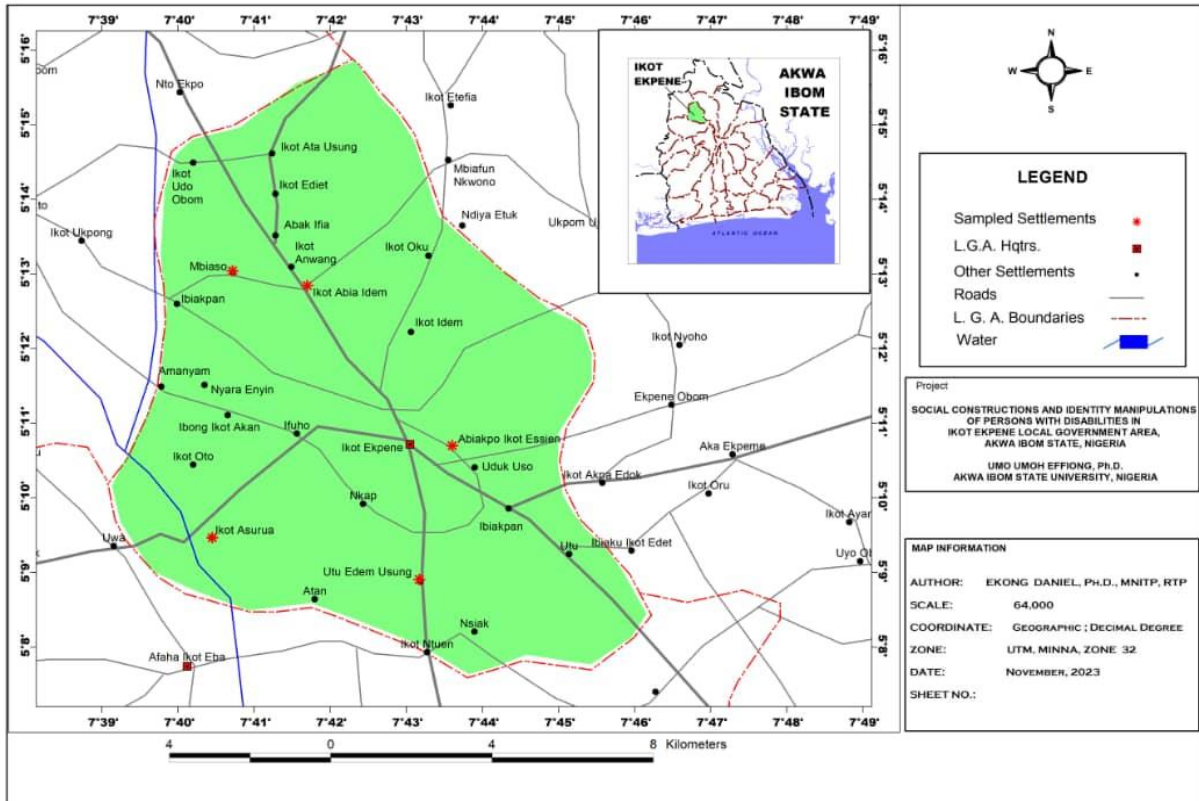
Source: Ekong, D. (2023). The Map of Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State.

Methodology

The methodology of this study was developed based on previous similar studies conducted worldwide and their applications to address policy gaps on this topic. The research methods used in this work include a literature review and a case interview. The information used in this study was obtained from fieldwork conducted in five selected communities namely: Utu Edem Usung, Ikot Osurua, Abiakpo Ikot Essien, Ikot Abia Idem and Mbiaso in Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area, involving FGDs to elicit qualitative data from participants within selected the communities. Separate FGDs were conducted for men and women to facilitate gender differences. The men were randomly selected during informal meetings. Women were recruited by a woman leader and women's associations using a systematic random sampling technique.

Discussions with study participants focused on their personal experiences in their communities. A large amount of data was collected through field surveys. The researchers were faced with the challenge of reducing the raw narratives to manageable sizes. This task was accomplished by limiting the number of participants to a core group representative of each community. The core group limited the information generated into sub-themes presented below:

Findings and Discussion

Beliefs about Physically Impaired Persons

Negative attitudes and erroneous beliefs about disability can result in stigma, which may be defined as an attribute possessed by a person or group that is regarded as undesirable or discrediting. Studies have shown that people with disabilities suffer movement restrictions which further expose them to risks of accessing food, medication and other essential needs of life. A 52-year male participant with disabilities in Mbiaso shared his thoughts on these issues thus:

"The people with disabilities and their families living in Mbiaso community have experienced difficulties and untold hardships in carrying out daily economic activities".

This corroborates the positions of Effiong, Ekanem & Ottong (2023) and WHO (2014) that people with disabilities experience difficulties in carrying out daily routines in most rural communities.

A participant, (male), 45 years old participant in Abiakpo Ikot Essien Village responded thus to a question "Has Annang culture fair to persons with physical disability in the village?"

"Disability, in many cultures, as well as Annang, is seen as a form of punishment. The individual with a disability, his or her family, or an ancestor, according to the some belief systems have been either cursed by God or the Gods, sinned, or violated a taboo".

This corroborates field studies in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia, reported in 2011 by the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF)that common beliefs about the causes of physical disability also include sin or promiscuity of the mother, an ancestral curse; or demonic possession.

Another participant (female) and a member of a Disability Group – "*Like Minds***"** in Ikot Osurua:

"False perceptions and beliefs about disability are often difficult to overcome as; some attitudes towards persons with disabilities held by some traditional societies gave way to more negative views and beliefs".

Families though can also stigmatise their relatives with disabilities. As a result of being stigmatised – by the family, community, or both – people with disabilities can feel isolated and worthless. They can even take on society's false assumptions and beliefs and self- stigmatise (Effiong, Udoyen & Udo, 2018).

A 26-year-old female respondent sampled at Ikot Ituen in Utu Edem Usung noted the effects of stigmatization, prejudice and cultural stereotypes against persons with disabilities thus:

"Some of the effects of stigma include feelings of shame, hopelessness and isolation, reluctance to ask for help or to get treatment, lack of understanding by family, friends or others......."

This shows that some people are aware of the harmful effects that negative perceptions can cause these differently-abled persons in our communities, which has gone a long way to confirm the position of Effiong *et al.* (2017b) in their study that "disability impacts negatively on people's social relationships and social participation as people with disabilities experience most difficulty in the home.

Beliefs about Visually Impaired Persons

As one woman with a physical disability in Ikot Abia Idem puts it,

"Some people say the reason why I am visually impaired is because I committed a sin".

This corroborates studies by WHO (2010) which observed cultural perceptions of disability as punishment for past wrongdoings. These views according to Effiong (2019), are still present today in many traditional societies. Another person with visual impairment in Ikot Osurua community responded to a question on why he was born blind and the community's perception of his predicaments.

".... complications during my birth, according to my mother exposed me to risk factors leading to my loss of sight, and today, I am being seen as a 'witch' or 'outcast' by my people".

This aligns with empirical studies by Zhang and Haller (2013) on disability identity development revealing a few important factors that are associated with the development of disability identity. Another person with visual impairments in Mbiaso responds thus:

"I think many of them would think that this girl with hearing impairments is going to be difficult for the parents to manage their independence, future, possible marriage, getting a job as well as having a place in society...Yeah, no future".

The study on individuals with hearing disabilities conducted in Vietnam confirmed this perceived stigma related to this type of disability (Zhang et al., 2017). Culture can be seen as a "construction" of reversible reaction. Culture constructs us, and we in turn construct it. Cultural construction implies that not all thoughts, feelings, and human activities are natural; but they are the result of historical experiences that become an integral part of culture.

Beliefs about Intellectually Impaired Persons

Some members of the rural community believed that people with intellectual disabilities would grow out of it. Fewer worries and more hopes for normality were particularly reported if the person with an intellectual disability was young. Participants reported that intellectual disability

is viewed as a tragedy by the Nigerian community, whose members tend to feel sorry for the parents of a child with an intellectual disability.

A Disability Rights Advocate and a social worker in Ikot Ekpene responded to the question on the chances of the intellectual development of intellectually impaired persons thus:

"I think the majority of people will say that, he is young, he is a child, he will get over it and it is not going to last forever. When an intellectually impaired young person is of age, his or her intellectual development matures or develops correspondingly and chances of reducing the risk factor.."

One participant also reported that the Abiakpo Ikot Essien community generally focused on negatives and therefore was unable to concentrate on the future of a person with intellectual disability.

"I think that people admire them. They also feel sorry for them, so like 'Toba' [God forbid] Hopefully this kind of thing will never happen to us. It seems like quite an ordeal and they have to have a lot of patience and it's a massive commitment ... so there is support for the parents, but there is a feeling of 'I feel sorry for the parents'.

Such feelings, according to Effiong (2019), for the parents most probably result from prevalent beliefs that people with intellectual disabilities have a bleak future and will be a burden for their families. A participant from Utu Edem Usung responded thus:

"They get abused and things like that so it is better because they will end upon the street, begging ... so it is better that they just die with them".

This corroborates the findings of Effiong (2017) that people with disabilities are part of oppressed people in the world who are rarely recognised as a group with distinct needs and rights because their status is not esteemed and their lack of physical strength and mental maturity exposes them to frequent human rights violation by their caregivers.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The social construction of disability refers to the social contexts that serve to maintain the oppression of people with disabilities in society. The lack of literature and research on the social construction and identity manipulation of the identities of people with disabilities in Nigeria indicates their invisible experiences and their powerlessness. As in many urban and rural communities across the country, people without disabilities have little knowl-edge or understanding of people with disabilities. Admittedly, the experiences of people with disabilities in different societies indeed vary depending on cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, disability status, socio-economic sta-tus, educational attainment and geographical locations among others.

However, even if we talk about how culture and other factors differ from each other, there are similarities in the situation of people with disabilities that are repeatedly highlighted in the literature of all countries and societies. The findings of this literature review show that most people with disabilities do not participate fully or equally in many societies and are systematically excluded, starting in the education and employment sectors. Even if they are

employed, they are paid less and are more likely to face discrimination due to disability and social status. Besides, they are more vulnerable and are often victims of violence (be it physical, emotional or sexual). Therefore, the study recommended a cost-effective strategy to reach persons with disabilities in their communities. This approach makes use of existing community services and promotes inclusion rather than exclusion.

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