



# Perceptions about Disability among Persons with and without Disabilities in Sekondi, Ghana: A Qualitative Study

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## Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author EC designed the study, wrote the interview protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors AA and EC managed the analyses of the study. Author AA managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

Persons with disabilities constitute a significant proportion of the minority population in Sekondi, Ghana. Yet, they are the most neglected and existing programs do not meet their needs. Consequently, this study aimed to understand the perception of persons without disabilities towards individuals with disabilities in Sekondi and to explore the attitudes of the general public towards disability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 persons with disabilities and 25 persons without disabilities over an eight-week period. Persons with disabilities were individuals receiving services from the Department of Social Welfare in Sekondi. Thematic analysis was used to analysed data from the interviews. The study revealed that the participants without disabilities viewed disability as a disease and a punishment from God or the gods. Yet, they indicated that they showed compassion and love towards persons with disabilities. However, most persons with disabilities disagreed to this while a few argued that they were shown love by their typical peers.

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Also, both persons with and without disabilities stated that having the experience with care for persons with disabilities and being a female are features which meant the individual is likely to develop positive attitude towards persons with disabilities. It has been suggested that training should be given to people with the experience and more women caring for persons with disabilities in Ghana as these women are more likely to provide adequate care and protection for individuals with disabilities. Finally, policies and programs for persons with disabilities in Sekondi should consider recommendations to promote the wellbeing of persons with disabilities.

*Keywords: Perception; disability; Ghana; qualitative study; evaluation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Persons with disabilities represent the largest minority group in the world, estimated to include over 10% of the world population [1]. Social and architectural barriers continue to prevent persons with disabilities from accessing social services [2,3]. For example, over 90% of children with disabilities do not have access to education and the world literacy rate for adults with disability is 3% [4]. Moreover, 80 to 90% of persons with disabilities in the developing countries within the working age are unemployed [4]. The 2010 Population and Housing Census in Ghana showed that there were 737,743 persons with disabilities in the country representing 3% of the total population. However, in 2012, it was estimated that there were 2.5 million persons with disabilities in the country [5]. This represents over 60% increase in the population of persons with disabilities in Ghana. This calls for an increasing attention to the conditions of life of these persons in Ghana.

Disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitation and participation restrictions, denoting the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual with a health condition and that individual's contextual factors [6]. This view of disability is an extension on the traditional definition of disability which focuses on impairment. The contextual or environmental factors faced by individuals with disabilities include barriers imposed by society, people's perceptions about disability and how persons with disabilities are provided with services. Persons with disabilities are those with long-term physical, sensory, intellectual, mental health, emotional, developmental, non-visible, speech and language disability [7].

Persons with disabilities are generally perceived negatively due to ignorance, socio-cultural and economic factors. The challenges faced by persons with disabilities are varied and includes violation of human rights, discrimination,

oppression, stigmatization and exclusion [7,8]. Especially in Africa, persons with disabilities are given labels with negative connotations. These labelling attitudes tend to be influenced by background, family culture and individual personalities [9]. For instance, general attitudes towards children with learning difficulties in Ghana is that they are "children of the rivers and forest" and in the past they were returned to the rivers or forest under the guise of taking them back to "where they came from" [10, p. 773].

These attitudes towards persons with disabilities are not only within their community life but extends to employment, work life and education. Hinton [11] has observed that persons with disabilities in the United States are not treated fairly by the job market as they are not seen as capable of completing tasks, even after the introduction of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. However, Oliver [12] has lamented that persons with disabilities are not engaged in the job market not because they lack the requisite skills and knowledge but because they have been denied access to quality education.

Also, a study by Naami and Hayashi [13] showed that majority of Ghanaian university students strongly agreed that persons with disabilities should not be integrated into the regular classroom. These perceptions about disability in Ghana is not helpful as it would prevent persons with disabilities from forming relations with their typical peers [14]. In Sekondi, perceptions about persons with disabilities have not been explored. Moreover, there is scant evidence in Sekondi on how persons without disabilities behave towards persons with disabilities. In order to address this gap, this study explored the perceptions of persons without disability about disability, the attitudes of the general public towards persons with disabilities (from the views of persons with and without disabilities) and the factors influencing these attitudes.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1 Study Area**

This study was conducted in Sekondi, the second half of the capital city, Sekondi-Takoradi of the Western region in Ghana with a population of 559,548 and 96.1% urban [15]. Sekondi is located at the South-Western part of the Western region and covers a land size of 191.7 km<sup>2</sup>. The most common form of disability in Sekondi-Takoradi is sight (42.6%), followed by physical (23.5%) and intellectual disability (17.5%). Out of the total population (559,548) in Sekondi-Takoradi, 16, 689 are with disabilities [15]. There are more males with disability than females in the Metropolis. Slightly above half (51.1%) of the disability population are not economically active. However, 43.9% of the population are employed. Employment for those with visual impairments is the highest, as well as education. It appears that the people of Sekondi are able to meet the needs of the persons with visual impairment better than those with other forms of disability.

### **2.2 Study Population and Sampling**

The researchers adopted the snowball sampling technique to recruit persons with disabilities for the study, due to the difficulty to identify and interview them. Initial contacts were made with the persons with disabilities who received financial assistance under the District Assemblies Common Fund from the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in Sekondi. After initiating contacts with the participants at the DSW, they were asked to identify other persons with disabilities who would be interested in the study. The research participants were recruited following their consent to participate in the study. Persons with disabilities in Sekondi who were not receiving services from the DSW were not included. A total of 17 persons with disabilities spanning three disability groupings including physical, visual and hearing disabilities were recruited for the study.

Further, the purposive sampling technique was used to identify the persons without disability. This sampling technique was used in order to enable the researchers identify participants who have knowledge about the issue under investigation [16,17]. Consequently, only participants who were living with persons with disabilities or have had the experience of living with persons with disabilities were identified for the study. To ensure this, the participants who

were selected from Sekondi were initially asked whether they have cared for or lived with a person with disability. All those who answered "Yes" were recruited in this study. Following this, 25 persons without disabilities were recruited for the study.

### **2.3 Study Participants**

The study participants included 17 persons with disabilities, as well as 25 purposively selected persons without disabilities in Sekondi. The 17 persons with disabilities who participated in the study included 11 males and 6 females. Most of the participants (8 of 17) have visual impairments, 6 had physical disabilities while 3 had hearing impairments. With regards to their onset of disability, 6 research participants indicated they acquired their disability at birth while 11 acquired their disability after birth. They were between the ages of 20 and 60. Five participants were between 20 and 30, 7 participants were between 31 and 40, 3 were between 41 and 50 and 2 fell within 51 and 60 years. Most of the participants (11 of 17) were single, 4 were divorced and 2 were cohabiting.

Further, majority of the persons with disabilities (10 of 17) have had some form of education. Their level of education included primary, secondary and university. A significant minority (6 of 17) had no formal education while 1 participant had dropped out from school. Regarding their employment status, 9 participants were unemployed, 5 were traders, 1 was a teacher and 2 were students.

The study also included 25 persons without disabilities in Sekondi. Majority of the persons without disabilities (16 of 25) were females. A significant minority (11 of 25) were between the ages of 41 and 60 while 14 participants were between the ages of 21 and 40. Most participants (23 of 25) were married, 5 participants had divorced while 4 had never married. With respect to their education, majority (16 of 25) have had formal education and 9 persons without disabilities had no formal education. More than half of the participants have had the experience of living with persons with disabilities while a small percentage of them (16%) were living with persons with disabilities at the time the study was conducted.

### **2.4 Data Collection**

Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the two researchers with the study participants over

a period of two months. The interviews, which averaged 50 minutes, were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guide at the homes of the participants, the interview location was the choice of research participants. The semi-structured interview guide contained thirteen questions related to the study objectives. However, in order to ensure the flexibility and depth of qualitative investigations, some questions were asked through probing which were not included in the guide. The interviews were conducted between the researchers and the participants, no other family members or friends were involved due to the sensitive nature of the topic under investigation. A sign language interpreter from the DSW assisted in the interviews with participants with hearing impairment. The interview questions were focused on the objectives of the study, which were to explore the individual's perceptions about disability. Particular issues discussed in the interview included understanding the attitudes of persons without disabilities that influenced their perception of persons with disabilities.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researchers assured participants that their identities would remain anonymous, consequently, pseudonyms were used to replace participant's real names. The researchers used the thematic analysis style [18] to analyse the interview data. The following methods were employed according to the thematic analysis style. First, transcribed data were read and reread by the researchers to increase familiarity with data. Initial codes were generated by the researchers and these were organised into potential themes. Codes like "inability", "discrimination", "difficulty" and "inactivity" emerged at this stage. The researchers ensured that the emerging themes were consistent with the research objectives and questions. At the final stage, extracts clearly related to the research objectives were identified and included in the study. Also, themes grouped under the study objectives were refined to ensure internal homogeneity; that is, to ensure that responses coded into a theme represented a coherent pattern. The researchers included all themes that emerged from the data into the study.

The triangulation by observer was used during the data analysis to ensure the credibility of this qualitative research. To this effect, all

researchers analysed the data independently to be sure important ideas were not missing and that there is some consistency in how the data analysis was linked to the findings [19]. The results of the analysis were then compared with each researcher's to ensure coherency. Finally, transcripts of the analysed data were given to three participants without disabilities and three persons with disabilities for their corroboration.

## 2.6 Ethical Considerations

Permission to make contact with the persons with disabilities was sought from the DSW. Before they were asked to participate in the study, informed consent was sought from all research participants. Following this, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and they were informed that their participation in the study should be voluntary and they could withdraw their participation at any time without consequences.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Views of Persons without Disabilities about Disability

#### 3.1.1 Disease

When asked about their views of disability, majority of the persons without disability (19 of 25) thought of disability as a disease. The participants argued that disability, in most cases, is a medical condition which requires treatment. They stated that disability is the result of an illness or an unfortunate event that happens to an individual. Consequently, they opined that persons with disability suffer from ill-health. Because the research participants viewed disability as a disease, they indicated that it could occur to anyone. Further, they observed that disability is the result of an accident caused to an individual. In stating that disability is a disease, one research participant had this to say:

*"Yes, being disabled is a sickness that sometimes has no cure, not even sometimes looks like it always has no cure. Because the people I know who have been disabled have not been cured. It is a bad disease that happens to people. It's not like malaria or something that is temporary. Most disabilities I have seen are permanent, not a good disease."* (Male 1, participant without disability).

This view of disability connotes it as a disease that could affect all people. Moreover, the participant agreed that when affected with a disability, it is difficult to cure. It appears that the participant was referring to individuals who acquired the disability through an accident. This is because most of the participants were of the opinion that most disabilities acquired by accident cannot be cured. Essentially, they indicated that this form of illness could be acquired through an accident:

*“When you get yourself involved a terrible motor-vehicle accident, the consequences can be damaging to your physical structure. You may lose a limb or two, when this happens it is usually difficult to get back on your feet. With this form of illness, you may not be able to perform your usual duties.”* (Female 3, participant without disability).

This shows a view of disability as an illness that permanently demobilizes individuals. When referring to disability as a disease acquired through accidents which may not be cured, most participants referred to physical disabilities.

### **3.1.2 A punishment from God or the gods**

Majority of the persons without disabilities (19 of 25) alluded to the idea that disability was a punishment for sins committed against God. They indicated that most children face disabilities as a punishment for the atrocities committed by their parents. Still, others indicated that it was a curse from the gods. They agreed that their disability was brought upon themselves as a result of their own deeds. A participant indicated:

*Some disabilities can be a curse to the parents, their families and the people around them. That’s why when some people realise they have given birth to a child with disability they throw the child away. That does not sound good but they don’t want to have that curse on themselves. It could cause lots of problems for them.* (Female 7, participant without disability).

It appears that the attitudes and beliefs of most participants towards persons with disabilities were influenced by their fear in deities and gods, who are capable of inflicting punishment on those who go against the law. As a result of this, some parents and children are blamed for bringing disability on themselves. Also, data from the interviews suggest that getting rid of a baby

with disability who can be a source of curse is better than destroying an entire family if the baby lives. This reflects the traditional Ghanaian views of disability that demonstrate negative opinions towards persons with disabilities.

Some research participants also had the idea that perhaps some parents have gone against the wills of the gods and the gods are responding by afflicting their children with various forms of disabilities. These perceptions about disability view the condition as part of the parent’s or families’ destiny for offence against the gods. Consequently, people holding these traditional views consider it a taboo to have a child with disability. That is the more reason why most children with disability in Sekondi are left uncared for. Many of such children with disabilities are placed in institutional care.

## **3.2 Attitude towards Persons with Disabilities**

### **3.2.1 Love, kindness and respect**

A significant majority of the persons without disabilities (24 of 25) stated that they will always love persons with disabilities and give them the favour in any circumstance. They highlighted that disability is a challenging condition as a result of their impairments and people suffering from disability face difficulties in performing their tasks. The participant stated that most persons with disabilities in Ghana are isolated, therefore, they need to be shown love in order to feel part of society. A participant recounted this when speaking about the love he showed to persons with disabilities:

*“One day I was about to cross the road and I saw a physically challenged person who had difficulty crossing the road. There were many cars on the road saw he couldn’t cross. He needed someone to help him I took him on my back and we crossed the road safely. These are some of the many ways we show care to persons with disabilities.”* (Male 4, participant without disability).

Another participant reflected on this:

*“Most of the persons with disabilities feel they have been rejected by society. So, society have to act in certain ways that they would make persons with disabilities feel part of the system. We should actively engage them in employment community activities*

*and show them respect. We should let them know that they are capable of performing roles in the society. When you come to our church, persons with disabilities are always engaged in our games and we encourage them to perform church responsibilities. They are part of us.”* (Female 5, participant without disability).

This shows research participant's agreement to engaging persons with disability in the society. It is suggested that when this is done, persons with disabilities would feel belonged and loved by the community in which they live. It appears that people in Sekondi view individuals with disabilities as vulnerable people who require care and attention. In Sekondi, the implication is that persons with disabilities are perceived as people who may not be able to function adequately without the help of community members.

### **3.2.2 Negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities**

Although majority of the persons without disability agreed that they demonstrated love towards persons with disability, most persons with disabilities (12 of 17) identified for the study disagreed to this. Data from the interviews showed the views of persons with disabilities indicating that the public demonstrated a negative attitude towards them. They stressed that the general public avoided contact with them and gave them few opportunities. Further, they indicated that they were not assisted to perform the normal tasks of daily functioning. One person with disability reflected on this:

*They do not help us. They think we can't do anything so when we go to them for help they don't do anything. Right now, I am not working because no one wants to employ me. This is difficult, but wat can I do? When you go to them for work they think you will bring losses to them, so they don't help.”* (Male 1, participant with physical disability).

The interview data showed that persons with disabilities in Sekondi are not provided with the opportunity to engage in work to earn a living. This is particularly true for persons with disabilities seeking employment from private individuals. Most small-scale private agencies in Ghana are not measured by the standards of the Ghana Disability Act 2006 (Act 715), consequently, they do not see the need to employ persons with disabilities. In fact, most

private employers in Ghana are not aware of the existence of the Act. In reflecting on how they were neglected by society, one person with disability stated:

*“When you go to many places you see that we are separated from the nondisabled. Go the schools, workplaces, markets, even the churches. When children are playing in school, you see persons with disabilities student sitting somewhere lonely. Is this respect? How do you want the person to feel? Hmmmm. When you go to the compound houses in Sekondi, you see some people don't allow persons with disabilities to use their washrooms.”* (Female 3, participant with visual impairment).

The participants showed that persons with disabilities are not respected in Sekondi. This is because they were seen as “less-human” and unable to contribute meaningfully to society. However, persons with disabilities revealed that they would be able to function in society as expected when given the opportunity. Further, persons with disability in Sekondi are not encouraged to engage in social activities. This is more likely to destroy their potential and create a society where there would be no hope for persons with disabilities.

Nonetheless, few persons with disabilities held the view that they were treated with humanity and respect by their typical peers. They indicated that they had people in the community who respected them for who they are and showed them ways to fit in the society. One participant said: *“oh, they are good, they help with a lot of things at work and home”* (Male 5, Physically challenged). The implication of this is that both persons with disabilities and those without disabilities should work together in order to ensure the engagement and acceptance of persons with disabilities in the society.

## **3.3 Factors Influencing Attitude towards Persons with Disabilities**

### **3.3.1 The gender of an individual**

Majority of the research participants revealed that gender shapes one's perception about disability. Out of the 21 persons without disability, 18 stated that females demonstrated compassion and positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities than males. They viewed women as having more sympathetic views towards

disability. In explaining this, one research participant had this to say:

*"Oh, yes, I would say females are good. They have compassion, love and sense of responsibility towards persons with disabilities. Most men don't care, I think it is our nature. But the females are better. They give a lot of assistance to persons with disabilities than a male would do, you, know, they are others. And that is what mothers do."* (Male 17, participant without disability).

This shows that females seem to be more compassionate towards persons with disabilities than males. Therefore, it is more likely that females in Sekondi would have positive perceptions about persons with disabilities. As the quote above has shown, females show their motherly love to persons with disabilities by providing them with the needed care and attention. This is a way of showing persons with disabilities that they are part of the society.

On the other hand, very few (3 of 21) were of the opinion that males, rather than females, demonstrated a favourable attitude towards persons with disabilities. Their argument was that some disabling conditions are unpleasant that it takes courage to make contact with individuals suffering from such conditions. They stressed that men do not show discomfort towards these things but are able to approach such individuals in a way that make them feel belonged. A research participant indicated: *"Some disabilities are serious that you can't look, it takes the courage of men to speak with those people"* (Female 5, participant without disability). Although their argument may not be strong, it helps to understand that men in Sekondi can also provide assistance to individuals with disabilities.

The views of persons with disabilities were not different from the ones revealed by individuals without disabilities. Most of the persons with disabilities (15 of 17) agreed gender affects perception about disability. This group of research participants held the view that females are naturally compassionate because of their motherly traits. Similarly, persons with disabilities stated that as mothers, females are expected to care and show love to others. Therefore, they were of the view that this translates into their show of sympathy to individuals with disabilities.

### **3.3.2 Experience with care for persons with disabilities**

Majority of the persons without disabilities (13 of 25) held the view that having the experience of caring for or living with a person with disability positively influences one's attitude towards individuals with disability. They stated that individuals who had cared for a person with disability do not disregard persons with disabilities but give them the love and care that they need. One of the research participants reflected on this:

*"If you have ever cared for persons with disabilities, it changes how you see them. People who have nurtured individuals with disabilities treat persons with disabilities well because they get to understand their conditions and know to develop their potentials. It is about experience, they more you walk with them the more you understand them."* (Male 19, participant without disability).

This shows that experience with care for persons with disabilities is significant to ensuring that persons with disabilities are given adequate care and protection. This is because as caregivers provide care to persons with disabilities for a significant period of time, they tend to develop affection for them which translates into shaping their positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

Similarly, findings from the interview data revealed that a significant minority of persons with disabilities (12 of 27) were of the opinion that experience with care positively influenced general attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Nonetheless, they indicated that experience alone does not enhance a positive attitude towards persons with disabilities. However, it can also take an individual's personality. These individuals stated that some people, by nature, generally show aversion towards persons with disabilities. They indicated that, for these people, no level of education or degree of experience with care for persons with disabilities can alter their attitudes

## **4. DISCUSSION**

This study sought to achieve the following research objectives; to identify the perception of the typical persons in Sekondi about disability, to

know the attitudes of both persons with and without disabilities towards persons with disabilities and to explore the factors influencing those attitudes. The aim of this study is to inform policy decisions and practice about persons with disabilities in Sekondi and Ghana at large. Although the variables examined in this study were limited, the findings represent the views of a group of people in Sekondi which could be used as a stepping stone for developing disability policies in Sekondi. Generally, persons without disabilities showed a negative view towards persons with disabilities. Majority of the participants viewed disability as a disease and a punishment from God or the gods. The participants' view of disability as a disease reflects the medical model of disability [9]. This model considers disability as a form of physiological impairment caused by a disease. This perception holds that the individual is the problem, hence attention should be directed towards providing medical services to the individual, perpetuating social exclusion [20]. It appears that most people in Sekondi have not changed their general perceptions towards persons with disabilities. Education in Sekondi should be intensified in order to make people understand that social and cultural factors also disables the individual with disability [12], as this influences people's attitudes towards persons with disabilities.

It appears that the strongly held traditional Ghanaian views about persons with disabilities are still existing in Sekondi. Findings from this study corroborate with what has been observed by Avoke [9] indicating that disability was the result of punishment from the gods for a wrongdoing. Additionally, it has been stated that this view is prevalent in communities where members are superstitious [21]. This negative view about disability gained root in traditional African societies where there was ignorance and a lack of education about disability. Findings from this study has shown that the traditional views about disability seems to be persistent in Sekondi. This is not only true in Sekondi but some communities in South Africa also hold negative views towards persons with disabilities which affect their potential to be economically active [22]. It appears that government policies and legislations alone are not sufficient in sensitizing the community about disability. As this study has shown that the people hold negative views about disability, community leaders and institutions including churches should play a role by implementing strategies to

change the attitudes of the people in Sekondi towards disability.

Although the persons without disabilities in Sekondi had negative perceptions about disability due to their traditional and religious orientations, they showed evidence of demonstrating love, care and respect towards persons with disabilities. It appears that community members in Sekondi agree with the idea of community integration and equal rights for persons with disabilities [23]. They were of the view that persons with disabilities should not be rejected in the society, but engaged in activities. Similar finding was found by Naami and Hayashi [13], indicating that most university students in Ghana support the idea of integrating persons with disabilities into the community. On the contrary, persons with disabilities stated that the typical peers did not treat them kindly. This is not surprising as the perception of these persons towards people with disabilities were generally negative. However, these mixed results lend caution in interpreting the study findings and applying them to other contexts.

Finally, it has been revealed by the study that being a female and having a care experience with persons with disabilities suggest the development of a positive attitude towards persons with disabilities [24]. Although the literature reviewed for this study did not show any significant relationship between one's gender and attitude towards persons with disabilities [24,25], it appears that this finding is unique to the people of Sekondi. Also, programs can be introduced within the community to change the attitudes of men towards persons with disabilities. Further, like other studies [26,27], it has been shown that experience in dealing with persons with disabilities positively influences an individual's perception about persons with disabilities. Again, it is suggested that caregiving roles related to persons with disabilities in Sekondi should be given to individuals with some experience in caring for persons with disabilities.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the fact that the persons without disability in Sekondi have negative views about persons with disabilities, caregivers working with persons with disabilities should intensify education to help change the thinking of typical persons in Sekondi. This is because their perception influences their attitudes and it is important to change those perceptions.



Community leaders are also expected to engage in these forms of education. Further, workshops should be held for professionals to know how to work with persons with disabilities in ways that would empower them. Further, training should be given to more women caring for persons with disabilities in Ghana as these women are more likely to provide them adequate care and protection.

Finally, in order to inform national policy and practice, it is recommended that national studies should be conducted related to the issue under investigation. However, findings from this study could serve as a starting point to begin discussions on how to promote positive perceptions about disability in Sekondi and Ghana at large.

## 6. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study findings provided mixed perceptions. While people without disabilities in Sekondi agreed that they showed love and respect towards persons with disabilities, persons with disabilities indicated that they were rejected by society. These contradictory findings make it difficult to form conclusions. Consequently, similar studies should be conducted using focus group discussions with both persons with disabilities and those without disabilities in order to corroborate their views. Further, considering the limited sample size, findings from this study are unique to the population in Sekondi. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalising the study findings to other contexts.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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