

Visually Impaired Women and Employment in Cameroon

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Abstract

Access to employment for people with disabilities, and particularly women, has long been questionable, as they have been marginalized from society and condemned to work in "small jobs" because of their disabilities. Even though they benefit from public policies that promote their socio-professional integration and their access to education. In spite of this, very few visually impaired girls complete upper secondary education, which reduces their chances of employment in the formal sector. For those who do, it is not known how she lives and practices her occupation on a daily basis, and how she views herself and her activity. The present study aims to understand how visually impaired women live their occupation, while seeking to account for the social resources available to them to make the transition from disabling to enabling dispositions. The study is based on a qualitative approach and concerns three visually impaired women with whom individual interviews were conducted, focusing on the reflexivity of the meaning they give to the income-generating activity they carry out. The results reveal that they perceive themselves as victims of doubtful, distrustful, complacent looks; which paradoxically does not prevent them from valuing themselves and increasing their self-esteem, qualities necessary for a sustainable and inclusive development.

Keywords: visually impaired woman; perceptions; economic autonomy; generating activity; self-esteem

Introduction

In Cameroon, finding a job is an obstacle course. For some, it is necessary to rely on luck; and for others, on mysticism, even on religious practices and even on the absolution of a divine hand that delivers, saves and blesses. Now, a priori, there should be no lack of manpower in case of need, when we know that the right to work is recognized as a fundamental right by the Cameroonian Constitution, regulated by Law No. 92 /07 of August 14, 1992 of the Labor Code in its Article 2. This law stipulates that "the State must do everything possible to help its citizens find a job and keep it once they have obtained it" [1992: 16]. Compliance with this law would give everyone, especially visually impaired women, the full opportunity to participate in the development of society. As stipulated in the universal declaration of human rights and duties and in the civic code of each nation, FDV has the right to a job which, moreover, should be decent and pleasant for her and should allow her to exercise her civic duty. Enhancing her economic empowerment could also "contribute to sustainable development, poverty eradication and reduction of inequality at the national level"; and to

do so, "economic growth must be inclusive and compatible with the social and environmental aspects of sustainable development." [UN Women, 2018].

Indeed, the situation of people with disabilities in Cameroon has evolved considerably, mainly in the education/training and disability prevention sectors, since Law No. 2010/002 of April 13, 2010 on the protection and promotion of people with disabilities and its July 2018 Enforcement Decree. However, an area as important as employment, which is essential to socio-economic autonomy, as well as to social identity, still remains the element of struggle; this despite important progress and initiatives launched to promote the employability of people with disabilities. As an illustration, we can cite the recruitment of 25,000 young people in the civil service in Cameroon, instructed by the President of the Republic in 2010. The example of this recruitment allows us to measure the application of legislative measures relating to the rights of the disabled. However, the official recruitment act did not specify the jobs reserved for disabled persons and even less so for the FDV; this led us to believe that the latter could apply for all jobs according to their level of study and, in application of

the law specifying that the State and decentralized territorial communities protect certain jobs for the benefit of disabled persons.

The observation is that, defended by all international organizations, the right of women to contribute to social progress or development has seen very little improvement in Cameroon. Moreover, the unemployment rate among people with disabilities is 80% in some low-income countries (ILO), and women with disabilities are still far from the world of work and encounter obstacles and discrimination in their access to employment due to legal, social and economic disparities between men and women [Ekamena Ntsama, 2014]. Their participation in the labor market is relatively lower than that of men (MINAS, 2008, p: 6). Even though societies have moved from a vision of disability, highlighting incapacities to one displaying resources and potentialities [Plaisance, 2009], the fact remains that Cameroonian companies do not often advocate, the framing of diversity within their establishments, by integrating people with disabilities, and more specifically VFDs. This could be explained, according to Ekamena Ntsama [2014, p. 125], by "the destructuring of the labor market," with the result that the employment situation and the supply of social services have deteriorated, as well as the development of precarious jobs and an expansion of the informal sector. It is understood from the above and according to the WHO that, people with disabilities have a greater probability of not working, and are generally paid less when they have a job [Brasseur, 2016].

According to the monograph of occupations accessible to people with disabilities by type of impairment, designed by the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS) in Cameroon in 2008, 4 out of 10 people with disabilities are visually impaired in all regions of Cameroon, 1 out of 2 people with disabilities are employed, while 4 out of 10 are inactive and 1 out of 10 is unemployed. Consequently, although active, few VFDs work in the formal sector, because they do not easily go to school (distance from specialized schools); they do not obtain diplomas to be able to work and struggle to be insured because of a lack of initial training. This state of affairs pushes FDVs to self-employment and to enter the informal sector, because women in general are poorly represented in the liberal professions, particularly in the professions of lawyer, bailiff, doctor or accountant [MINPROFF, 2012]. Yet, men with disabilities, hold influential positions and

engage in formal and informal social activities to support their daily needs (Goula and Youwa, in press). The low representation of FDVs in positions of responsibility makes those who work in the formal sector (teachers, social security technicians, diplomats, etc.) pioneers. In contrast to the VDWs in the informal economy, the latter are recognized, registered, regulated or protected by labor laws and social protection. The specific inequalities and discriminations combining gender and disability suggest that the FDV "is not considered a competent person in the world of work" [Louvet & Rohmer, 2010]. Gender equality in employment and access to decent work for women with disabilities are therefore essential measures of inclusive growth. However, we do not know how women with disabilities experience their work, let alone how they cope with their disability and carry out the tasks entrusted to them in the context of this work; especially when we know that disability and the way it is represented in society is very often a factor of rejection, and that the inequalities marked by disability can jeopardize the development of human capacities in women with disabilities. For the person who is employed, what is her experience, her relationship with others? What strategies does she use to accomplish her task competently? How does the FDV see herself as a professional in a trade or job?

From visual impairment to entrepreneurial freedom: access to employment

According to the World Health Survey conducted by the WHO in 2016, approximately 785 million people (15.6%) aged 15 years and over live with a disability, and according to the DHS-MICS 2011, the blind represents 10.9% of the most prevalent forms of disability in Cameroon. These figures show the growing and alarming situation of disability (Goula, in press), even if the considerations related to the notion of disability are evolving and that from now on, disability would be the result of the confrontation between an impairment and the environment of the person. This physical disability cannot in any way alter the abilities of the person affected by it [Bardoulet and Igounet, 2007].

For WHO [2016], disability is defined as "any limitation in the ability of a person with an impairment to participate fully in an activity in a given environment." Impairment is understood here as the loss or dysfunction of certain body parts due to disease or trauma (also referred to as disability). Disability is the difficulty or impossibility of performing actions,

which can generally be attributed to one or more impairments [Ravaud, Letourmy and Ville, 2002]. In this regard, visual impairment includes visual acuity problems (blindness or reduced visual acuity), narrowing of the visual field and damage to the eyelids and oculomotor muscles. This visual impairment could constitute for the FDV "a tear in the space of life", if we refer to Gardou taken up by Le Breton and Tisseron [2005].

Empirical observation reveals that in Cameroon few DV girls continue their studies until the end of secondary school and even less until the higher level. This lack of qualification makes it difficult for them to compete in the labor market because they lack adequate skills, abilities and qualifications. In their quest for economic autonomy, some VDFs undertake commercial activities on their own account, and a majority of them operate in the private sector, in accordance with the Law of August 10, 1990 on the regulation of commercial activity. This law stipulates that "any Cameroonian or foreigner is free to undertake a commercial activity in Cameroon subject to the respect of the rights and regulations in force". Thus, "having a job and exercising a professional activity are important elements of the life of any citizen with or without a disability.

Indeed, an adequate framework (which is the emanation of protective and promotional social policies in the sense of Soulet, 2007, 2008, 2009) leading to social reintegration, by means or education/training with specific needs. For Soulet (2010), society, through its policies, should actually protect and support people with disabilities. Protecting them implies promoting them as actors, supporting at least in the enterprise their participation in the production of society [Soulet, 2010]. In other words, the social environment will ensure the development of three so-called fundamental needs for the disabled: autonomy, competence and social proximity. However, for the disabled person, true autonomy will only be acquired when he or she has learned to move and explore his or her physical environment thanks to the white cane. On the other hand, when society has given her the adequate conditions to read and write Braille, an essential element for her education and training. Thus, the FDV will mobilize personal and/or external resources, in order to transform this disabling disposition into an enabling disposition and will then have more than one possibility to get a job. Employment will always be perceived under the prism

of many factors, because the way of apprehending work, takes into account the entrepreneurial freedom of each individual, i.e. the ability to do, conduct or exercise such profession, art or trade. Although the laws are favorable to the initiatives of the FDV, their ability to exercise a job, contrary to the structural disqualifications of which they are victims for the most part (lack of technology and infrastructures appropriate to their handicap), thus prejudices their power of action.

The FDV's view of their job

For the FDV, employment appears not only as an activity with three main functions (economic, social and psychological), but also as a socio-cognitive process that organizes and builds the FDV's life by offering financial security and participating in its development. Indeed, for the FDV to have a job is to have "the ability to control and the feeling of power over the environment linked to the recognition by others of one's skills in this area" [Anaut, 2003, p. 60]. Even if disability is one of the characteristics described as stigmatizing, and therefore liable to lead to the social downgrading of the individual who has it [Goffman, 1975]. It is also to start from one's incapacitating life condition (unemployment, poverty, marginality, etc.), to take one's affairs into one's own hands and to advance one's cause.

Also, as an individual and a social actor, the FDV, like any thinking and acting subject, is characterized by the emergence of a specific dimension [Martuccelli, 2002], subjectivity, which is based as much on the particular experience of oneself as on the other. This subjectivity is a reflexive space (insofar as it constitutes the reality as perceived by each human subject): that of the representation of oneself and also the place of the awareness by the individual of his representations and of his relation to the world. Through the practice of reflexivity, she will be able to examine her situation and her action within the framework of the job she does. The construction of a critical look by the FDV, will participate in a recursive way to the construction of the self, from a grid of perception and recording elaborated through a cognitive architecture, which constitutes an identity trait. It is also a permanent feature of its action, called reflexive control of the action and thus important in the construction of the identity [Giddens, 1994].

Thus, thought and action in the FDV would constantly interact with each other in order to participate in the updating and problematization of everything that makes it possible to hold a job. If we

perceive ourselves as capable, endowed with potential, hard-working, tenacious, then society retains or keeps this image of us, but if, on the contrary, we perceive ourselves as diminished, fragile, without potential, amorphous, etc., then this is how society would perceive us and consequently treat us. In the same sense, for Rohmer and Louvet [2006, p. 51], echoing Colella and De Nisi (1998), the "perception of a disabled worker varies" and discriminatory attitudes towards the latter are generally less expressed when the job he or she performs is compatible with his or her disability situation.

Methodology

Study population and sample

In order to describe and explore in depth [Fortin, 2005] this phenomenon, which is still poorly understood or little known, that is, the exercise of a job among the FDV in Cameroon, the use of a qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate. It should be noted that the primary objective of the study is to provide an account of the experience of the FDV in the face of the professional practice of a trade. The study took place in Yaoundé/Cameroon with three visually impaired women who were members (in the text, A, B, C) of associations of blind people and who had succeeded in socio-professional integration. These women were selected using the typical sampling technique [Angers, 1992]. Five inclusion criteria were used to select the sample: (1) to be visually impaired (to have a national disability card), (2) to have been visually impaired for at least 10 years, (3) to have functional autonomy (mobility), (4) to be at least 25 years old, and (5) to be gainfully employed in the formal sector.

Data collection and analysis procedure

Semi-structured individual interviews were used as a tool. The data collection technique consisted of contacting the respondents and then presenting the purpose of the study. Once the interview situation was established, we proceeded with the actual interview. The data collected was analyzed using the method of thematic content analysis, paying attention to the way in which the FDV lives and practices her profession on a daily basis, and to the way she looks at herself and her activity.

Results

Before presenting the results, it seems useful to us to take a detour to present the profiles of the respondents.

Profiles of the respondents

A is visually impaired from birth, aged 37. She has a master's degree in law and works at the Caisse Nationale de Prévoyance Sociale (CNPS) as a social security technician. Single and mother/guardian of a dependent child, case A is sharing a flat with her sister.

B is blind, 29 years old. She is studying law and has been a general education teacher at the National Center for the Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities (CNRPH) for the past 6 years. She is married and has one child.

C is blind since the age of 10, aged 42. Single with 3 children, she lives with her mother and has been working for 16 years in the mobile gendarmerie as a social worker.

The results are based on two (02) themes of analysis related to the FDV's view of herself and her activity and the way she lives and practices her job on a daily basis.

The FDV's view of her job

Subjects A and B obtained employment through recruitment, following recommendations, they took turns in competitive exams, internships, with the aim of getting a job, but without success. Only C succeeded in the competitive examination of the National School of Social Affairs (ENAS) in order to train as a social worker. B and C work in the formal sector in accordance with their initial training (qualification), which is different from A. A and B put all their energy into studying in order to aspire to a profession in the field of law, as lawyers. It is in this logic that B expresses herself in these terms:

"To ensure my economic independence, my ambition was to study to practice law. I was even thinking of breaking into network marketing and continuing in entrepreneurship. But first I wanted to have a professional training in order to get a job quickly, which is what led me to train as a general education teacher".

We can also see this with A who underlines that the current job does not meet her aspirations because of a mismatch between her job at the social security and her initial training in law: "I am in the department in charge of processing family allowances". Despite the fact that their disability is not taken into consideration, these FDVs conscientiously carry out

their tasks and consider themselves competent. They say that they are satisfied with their jobs because they provide a decent source of income, although they are aware that they are somewhat slow in carrying out the tasks entrusted to them. Said:

"I find myself competent as far as processing files and satisfying clients, but I feel that I am not profitable enough because of my slowness. My work allows me to meet primary needs (rent, nutrition, medical care, childcare). I can also emphasize my femininity with a better physical appearance due to the fact that I can take better care of myself, therefore being more and more courted.

Following her, B adds with these words

"Even if my aspirations are not fulfilled by this job, I can also help others, when my expenses are lower. It is rewarding for me and I feel privileged to be one of the few visually impaired people who have a job, as very few works. It is a real honor for me under these conditions to work with this disability. This is all the truer since many people are looking for this possibility of a stable and salaried job without any follow-up. Moreover, I don't have to ask for financial assistance as before. My job also allows me to contribute to the expenses of my household. Therefore, my job is "my first husband".

C adds

"I have no real difficulties in the exercise of my profession. This is all the more so because it is perfectly in line with my training. So, my work is for me a great source of economic autonomy and fulfillment. I even have more weight in my family and I feel valued".

B and C's comments show that the right to work or to employment, when respected, allows the FDV to exercise her civic duty and to a certain extent to contribute to the development and well-being of the couple's life and therefore of the family. But having a stable job, more or less well paid, on the basis of a recommendation because of her disability is not always well perceived by the FDV. She would like to succeed through the same channels (competitive examination) as able-bodied workers and thus have the same career profile (change of grade, promotion, reclassification, etc.). This is the example of A who says:

"Holding a master's degree in law, I consider myself a role model academically. I think that after a few years of seniority, the service will be able to take my background into account for reclassification, as is done for all other social workers. This will allow me

to evolve within the structure and even to change departments, such as the litigation department, in order to better use my legal skills.

Socio-professional interactions and self-esteem

The integration of the subjects in the professional environment went smoothly, the exchanges with colleagues and users remain courteous and cordial. However, the relationship with the hierarchy is conflictual, as it appears from **A's speech**

"I still have a lot of difficulty adapting in my professional environment, and am still looking for my bearings. I have a few problems with the hierarchy, which does not fully appreciate my disability, which creates tensions due to my low level of performance, which cannot be the same as that of my sighted colleagues. One of my bosses seems to question the limits due to my disability, and constantly yells at me saying that I am not worth my degree in terms of profitability. He implies that I don't work.

Even if these FDVs often have a colleague within reach to help them, the difficulties they encounter in the professional environment are more of the order of material accessibility, of the work space. The subjects need an arrangement of the work space, as A notes:

"Despite my complaints to management, it took a while to reassign me. Although my new position is better, my performance is still poor because the documents I have to process in my department have a lot of small print. It is difficult because of the disability to be as efficient as others. So my colleagues are given more cases, yet I know I could be more profitable in the litigation department by using my knowledge and skills in law."

For B

"I teach in a class where there are, for example, subjects that I cannot teach, such as writing, copying texts on the board. In this school, each class has two teachers. For the moment, everything related to writing is the responsibility of my classmate. But I have informed the hierarchy of this difficulty so that I can be transferred to level 3, where the students do not necessarily need to have their lessons copied on the blackboard; I could just dictate them.

As for C, she has a good relationship with her colleagues, "My supervisors have always received me well and encouraged me. They are understanding about the limitations of the disability. I don't go out into the field and fill in the forms. My colleagues take care of that, they are very understanding.

The FDV has to find the psychological resources within herself not to give up; she has to find the strength to stay motivated at work. Even if colleagues and other employees are willing to help her in times of need, this does not exclude the fact that she needs to be available for herself. Sometimes she may feel dissatisfied that she is not making full use of these assets and skills:

"I motivate myself to do my best at work. Although I don't use my full potential, I hold on to that performance no matter how small it is. It's true that I feel diminished and frustrated by the hierarchy, which takes a toll on my self-esteem. I am not fulfilled professionally, and do not consider myself as a model in the field of employment, that is why I continue my studies and continue to look for my bearings. Nevertheless, I feel a certain value as a woman" (A).

For B

"My job is also a source of fulfillment for me, in that it allows me to get out of the house, meet people, laugh, even laugh with my students and make myself useful. This job allows me to avoid certain illnesses (anxiety, high blood pressure) due to inactivity".

However, in the light of these participants' comments, it is clear that the visually impaired woman's service colleagues have a mixed view of her. Some colleagues perceive the VD as a threat to their position. Others are complacent and offer to do their work for them. Faced with this situation, the FDV develops strategies to ensure good performance: assiduity and redoubled efforts at work, organization of their computer screen (A), innovations, continuous quest for knowledge. In the majority of cases, they are forced to question the hierarchy on their specific needs related to the disability, in relation to their function. Unfortunately, due to the slowness of the administration, these requests are not quickly dealt with, which significantly compromises their performance and, through the mechanism of self-achievement, can generate a certain professional dissatisfaction in them.

Discussions

Access to the job market for FDVs in Cameroon is not always easy in view of the context of inequalities and differences, pay gaps compared to men, lack of professional qualification, discrimination by employers, quality and quantity of employment available to women etc. (Ekamena Ntsama, 2014). Indeed, to transcend prejudice and aspire to a decent job, some FDVs (A and B) pursue higher education

until they obtain university degrees (bachelor's degree, master's degree); others, on the other hand (C), access vocational training through competitive examinations, either after university studies or after the end of secondary school (Baccalaureate).

The differentiated treatment that the subjects of the study undergo is the result of the socio-historical evolution of social representations of disability in a given society (Goldman, Gutek, Stein and Lewis, 2006). These social representations will guide and determine the behaviour of colleagues towards the disabled person, as well as their place in the specific environment of work and their understanding of the reality that surrounds them.

It is on the basis of the reception that will be given to the FDV, that the link that the latter will build with the individuals around him will depend. A favorable reception would allow the person to feel supported and to be sure of having the possibility to demonstrate his abilities and skills, on an equal footing with his able-bodied colleagues. If not, this would lead to frustration and the need to draw on her internal resources to maintain her motivation could be undermined. This will require a great deal of effort on her part to perform her task in a competent manner. These two cases highlight the link organizers that are almost always at the basis of the type of relationship or interaction privileged in society. It is in this sense that Joubert (2008) and Tsoukatou (2005), believe that the link organizers that are hatred, competition, passion, jealousy and love constitute elements capable of significantly influencing any relationship that the FDV will be able to establish with her work environment.

Thus, once employed, it is a new universe that the FDV integrates, because disability is often seen by companies as an obstacle to the productivity of individuals. She is subject to new interactions in her professional environment, with her colleagues, her hierarchy and, depending on the case, with the public she serves. However, the hiring of a female DV seems to create a climate of suspicion of laziness among her colleagues and superiors; insofar as contacts with their colleagues are often accompanied by doubts or even mistrust, as to the veracity of their competence and qualifications. The latter very often have a strong tendency to question the capacity of the FDV to occupy a job and to assume its daily functioning. Only, it happens, and it is the case very often, that the hierarchy is unaware of the practical arrangements for adapting the workstation by making the work tools

accessible and adapted to the disability (Bechrouri et al., 2012). An example can be taken from computers and cell phones that need to be equipped with voice synthesis. Also, certain equipment such as scanners must be provided to make documents accessible, if not transcribed into Braille format. Thus, the DV woman must take steps to inform her hierarchy. According to Gardien (2009), the disabled person can compensate for her disability, even if her field of knowledge is greatly reduced by the inaccessibility of all forms: physical and intellectual (inability to vocalize books or newspapers because not everyone can afford a Braille translator).

The feeling of usefulness and independence facilitates the adaptation of the FDV to the social environment, the community and the given social conditions. This is what A thinks when she says: "My work allows me to satisfy primary needs (rent, nutrition, medical care, schooling of the child)". This adaptation is strongly linked to the personality characteristics (willpower), abilities and needs of the FDV. Working in this sense is of great importance for the FDV because, as Gardien (2009, p. 97) shows us, "working impels a dynamic which, if it does not reduce the impairment, nevertheless restricts the obstacles to participation through the progressive development of bypass or adaptation strategies that allow the desired goal to be achieved".

The challenge lies in the ability to accept the disability. This acceptance of one's "new self" and the development of a new relationship with one's body that incorporates the disability is a long and difficult road for most people with disabilities. In order for this to be possible, the person with a disability "really needs to take ownership of his life, to make it his own and not to be left behind, to go beyond this moment where a limit to his existence is drawn. The basic work that can be envisaged in a situation of disability is therefore that of going beyond the limits of a limited and disadvantaged human being, and even the African magic-religious conception according to which disability is linked to a bad spell, an ancestral sin, or occult practices of the person's close or distant family (Goula and Youwa, in press). She can thus derive from this activity a positive feeling of control over her own life, which would gradually distance her from or protect her from the psychological helplessness and distress that these conditions (linked to the disabling disposition) of life normally entail. It is in this sense that A declares: "I can also emphasize my femininity with a better physical appearance due

to the fact that I can take better care of myself, therefore being more and more courted". Hence the interest of the expression empowerment, which allows us to closely identify the reality of the use of FDV. This concept includes a dimension of individual and collective emancipation of the disabled person, and is situated at the interface of the psychological and the social. Through the exercise of a job or activity, the FDV participates in the general activity of the city, has a personal status and acquires means of existence linked to the accomplishment of his/her talents" (Gohet, 2007, p. 23).

Conclusion

The present study aimed to understand the way in which the FDV live their profession, while trying to account for the social resources they have at their disposal to make the transition from a disabling disposition to an enabling one. The results show that the FDV perceive themselves as victims of doubtful, suspicious and complacent looks, which paradoxically does not prevent them from valuing themselves and increasing their self-esteem through their performance. From the above, we understand that it is up to the community to provide the means to compensate for the disability, by accompanying the job search process, by helping with training, by promoting different types of adjustments (technical, organizational) to allow the disabled person to find his or her place in the working world. However, this is only possible through a profound transformation of the cultural conditions that are linked to the social representations that Cameroonian society has of the FDV. Considered as an incapable and unqualified woman, who attracts complacency, dependent, etc., the FDV is defined by her action, her ability to weave links, to build relationships or oppositions, and it is therefore difficult to think or create a split between the FDV and her social situation. In this respect, the reinforcement of its socio-professional position appears to be a decisive element in the fight to reduce poverty, as presented in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995). But before that, awareness-raising is also an essential prerequisite for quality integration. Its objective is not only to raise awareness of disability but also to involve and empower all stakeholders so that they become actors in this integration.

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