



We are Part of the Family: Disabled Women and Othering in Urban Accra

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists and other scholars have demonstrated that disability or impairment is a socially constructed and relational phenomenon. But, how people with disability are defined and understood differs from one society to the other. Through the concept of othering, this paper examines how social, cultural, religious and political factors affect disabled women and how they navigate the social and physical spaces they inhabit. Drawing on ethnographic data from urban Accra and archival material, the study contributes to the broader understanding of disability, but more importantly, the specific case of disabled women and how they deal with the condition of disability in the family and in society. The study argues that the othering of disabled women in the family and society is more or less the presentation of a society that has disabled itself through the social and cultural borders/barriers it has set or built, and not disabled persons. The paper concludes by demonstrating that rethinking the lifeworld of disabled women and making them feel they belong requires a deconstruction of the social, cultural, political and religious barriers that create othering in its multiple manifestations.

Keywords: *Disability, Women, Othering, Family, Urban Accra, Ghana*

INTRODUCTION

Humans all over the world experience one form of disability or another at an early stage of life or later in life. Anthropologists have argued that disability or impairment is culturally or socially constructed, and as such, it is a relational term. But how men and women with disabilities are handled differs significantly from one society to the other. This understanding frames my specific interest in examining the othering of disabled women and how they navigate the challenges of their condition in the family and society in urban Accra, Ghana. In Africa, scholars such as Adom-Opare, (2022); Naami, (2015); Dassah et al., (2019); Ganle et al (2016); Badu et al. (2016); Opoku et al. (2023); Leshota & Sefotho, (2020); Nwokorie & Devlieger, (2019); Etieyibo, (2022) and Mwale, (2021) have argued that disability and the othering of disabled people is often framed through religion, culture, language, medicine, feminism, economics and human

rights issues. For example, Leshota & Sefotho, (2020), have shown that language is a paramount tool in determining how we understand disability. It gives a new theoretical trajectory of deconstructing the assumptions about disability and reconstructing new meanings that inspire a positive appreciation of disability.

Writing specifically about disabled women in Zambian society, Mwale argued that in Chewa society, disability is believed to be the result of a pregnant woman's "failure to follow food restrictions, sexual taboos and general moral conduct" (Mwale, 2021, p. 88). Here, a disabled child's condition is believed to be the result of her mother's disobedience to obey cultural and moral norms.

Elsewhere in Africa, Nwokorie and Devlieger (2019) demonstrated that among the Igbo of Nigeria, their cosmology is replete with beliefs about the othering of disabled people because in their worldview, such persons are 'unwholesome' or 'impure'. Indeed, for the Igbo, congenital disability leads to stigma and such a person, for example, cannot perform ritual libation because when he does, the prayer will remain suspended; it will not get to the ancestors. In a related case Etieyibo, (2022), shows in Africa, disability and disabled people are understood primarily through the lens of religion, through which disabled people are said to merit their condition because they have offended the

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gods or divinities who have the power to curse or punish any parent with a disabled child.

In Ghana, Ganle et al. (2016) have shown in their work that, in some families, parents will distance themselves from their disabled children because of public ridicule, shame and dishonour (see also, Badu et al., 2016). Adom-Opere's (2022) work lends credence to this assertion, demonstrating that, in some instances, disabled children who are rejected by family and community because of certain cultural practices are killed at birth, thrown away or left to die. In these two narratives, collective social expectations are employed to create and reinforce othering in the family and society. But the work of Opoku-Prempeh et al. (2017), however, shows that in some families, parents resist the othering of their disabled children by fleeing the communities if they felt they could not stand the sight of the child being killed or thrown away. Kassah et al. (2012), corroborate the work of Opoku-Prempeh et al. by demonstrating how some families resist societal othering of the disabled by accepting and protecting them from ridicule, verbal, or physical attacks.

Moreover, in Ghana, as in other African societies, disabled women tend to suffer more than their male counterparts in the manner that they are othered (Dassah et al., 2019). And in the family, men are less culpable than women when a child is born with a disability. It is believed that disabled women are more likely to regenerate or multiply their kind than their male counterparts. The patriarchal system whereby men tend to determine the substance and boundaries of what is permissible or not permissible in society invariably, provides the grounds for the differential application of social norms and values. In fact, in Ghana people with disability – especially women and children – are considered “subnormal” humans who cannot play proper social roles and need to be made “normal,” even if the “cure” involves human rights abuses (Kassah et al., 2014; Ganle et al., 2016). This understanding of the human person runs contrary to the ideals of African socialism and communalism, in which inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness is the norm in family life and society (Gyekye, 1997).

Drawn from the above, it is evident that, in Africa, there is a pervasive culture of disability and persons with disability are understood, more generally, through social, religious, biological, and cultural models or perspectives. These models serve as the primary lenses for appreciating the realities and nuances of the lives of disabled people in the family and society. In this article, however, my interest is in how social and cultural norms and expectations define how disabled women are (un)accepted in society, but especially in the family.

Thus, while there is no dearth of literature on disability and disabled persons, especially in the Ghanaian context, the literature has not particularly dealt sufficiently with the practice of othering in relation to disabled women in the family and society. Thus, the paper draws on the theory of othering to examine the lifeworld of disabled women in urban Accra.

Firstly, I focus on disabled, *ayarifo*, (a term used in Akan to designate people with various kinds of sicknesses, including mental or physical disability) women because they live in a society where most women are poor, socially, and politically disadvantaged due to entrenched patriarchal norms and power relations in the family and society.

Secondly, I will show how the everyday practice of othering is shaping and reshaping the lives of disabled women in the fields of education, health, livelihood, religion, and politics. Thirdly, I shall demonstrate how disabled women employ different ways to resist othering by redefining their place in the family and society. The paper will argue that disabled women's situation, is complicated by practices of othering expressed in the manner that they are stigmatised and marginalized in the family, but also simultaneously how families exploit their condition for monetary or material gains.

METHODOLOGY

The ethnographic data for this paper were gathered in 2023 in Ghana's capital city, Accra where, because it is the largest economic hub of the country, attracts many migrants, from rural areas, but also from neighbouring countries such as Togo, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast. In Ghana's cities, like many others in Africa, migration to the city is very attractive and is perceived by many people including disabled women as the place where one can “make it”. The study uses structured and semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions as a data collection tool, engaging 20 disabled women randomly chosen in Madina and Adenta, two large suburbs of Accra. The themes of the interviews were based on their identity within the family and society, sources of livelihood, education, health, and other related topics. The data served as a ground for appreciating and contextualizing the findings of the participant and non-participant observations I made of the lives of disabled women in urban Accra.

RESULTS

Conceptualising Othering

Othering is a multidimensional concept producing different meanings that could be applied to disciplines such as religion, anthropology, philosophy, sociology,

medicine, disability studies and many more (Said, 2003; Devlieger, 2022; Elias, 1994; Mik-Meyer, 2016; van Trigt & Legene, 2016; Sterzuk, 2015; and Spivak, 1985). However, Spivak, was first to introduce the concept of othering into social theory through her work *The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives* (1985). In this work, Spivak gave three illustrations of othering in British colonial archives in India.

Through the archives, Spivak realized that British colonial officials used the power vested in them to exploit the Indians, defining them as the subordinate other and morally inferior on their own soil. Spivak concluded that othering is a form of power instrumentalised by a dominant group to redefine the identity of the powerless and impose subservience and control, which more generally rests on the oppositional binaries of “we” and “they”, “them” and “us”, etc. Although Spivak’s work is about the colonial encounters between India and Britain, it does resonate with how disabled people, especially women, suffer from othering through the control of family members and society.

Moreover, Mik-Meyer (2016) show how workers in a Danish community represent colleagues with impairments as ‘other’, by comparing them with redheads, transvestites, non-ethnic Danes, and homosexuals whom they also construct as different. In a related body of research, van Trigt & Legene (2016) also argued that during Dutch colonial encounters in Surinam, the disabled were “othered in a way that was beyond the “othering” treatment generally accorded colonised peoples, and in the corresponding humanitarian discourse” (2016, p. 190). In fact, the colonial officials moved the disabled to places far away from the rest of society. Sterzuk (2015), equally brings to the fore how language, racial identities, and colonial orientations are employed in constructing othering in Canadian Universities within settler communities.

Drawn from the above, it appears, the disabled do not have the agency to resist the way that they are othered in the family and society. However, dwelling on his work among ethnic minorities in Danish society, Jensen (2011) explored two forms of agency *capitalisation* and *refusal* to demonstrate how these ethnic minorities redefine or refuse labels of othering. On the one hand, capitalisation shows how youth from the minority ethnic group pick up some elements of othering and instil them with symbolic value. On the other hand, refusal is a form of agency that permits the ethnic minorities who are seen to be the other to extricate themselves clearly, or through irony, from different practices of othering forced upon them. This narrative is not surprising, however, because corroborating Jensen’s position, Bobo (2016) argues that “othering” is not a static, uncontested social

phenomenon, but rather it always involves some form of contestation from those “othered” as they strive to adapt in ways that challenge the status quo that benefits those with the power to impose “othering.” Bobo’s analysis resonates with the way disabled women in urban Accra adaptably contest othering in the family and society.

The positions of van Trigt & Legene, (2016); Sterzuk (2015) and Bobo (2016) corroborate the arguments of Spivak (1985) that othering creates a culture of ‘outsideness’ (Elias, 1994), empowering the powerful to continue othering the powerless, and the creation of unnecessary difference. At the same time, those others will always find creative ways to resist their exclusion as the other and ‘different’ so as to participate in an inclusive society where their condition is accepted and appreciated. In this manner, othering “as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any full range of human differences based on group identities” could be mitigated (Powell and Menendian, 2016, p. 14).

Everyday Practices of Othering

In this part of the article, I will demonstrate the different social contexts in which disabled women suffer from different forms of othering and how they find ways to refuse everyday forms of othering in the family and society.

Othering and Belonging in the family - A person is not a palm tree that he [or she] should be complete or self-sufficient

In many societies across the world, the family is the most basic and significant social institution for socialization, belonging, social and economic support to its members (Nukunya, 2016). In Ghana, it is customary that anyone born into a family (dis)abled is ritually welcomed through a naming ceremony, which confers on the new member recognition, acceptance, as well as rights and responsibilities. In this custom, more generally, a disabled person’s involvement in the affairs of the family is not diminished by his/her disability. Ideally, everyone in the family relies on the social and material support of other members which is why we say, ‘a person is not a palm tree that he [or she] should be complete or self-sufficient’. In a word, relationships in the family and community evolve around interdependent practices that are meant to yield benefits for all members. But this is not always the case. For example, in some communities, disabled women are excluded from decision-making processes that affect them directly such as marriage, reproductive rights, family affairs related to land or other properties, and others are rejected as unmarriageable because they are disabled. The story of Serwaa, whom I interviewed at Madina elucidates my point;

I was born with a limping leg into a family that is loving and supportive. Later, growing up in the village, I met a young man who proposed marriage, and my family was happy about it. But the young man's parents and kin objected to the marriage with the excuse that I could end up bringing forth disabled children for the family. So, I lost the young man. I moved to Accra to find something to do but because I have no profession, I have been reduced to a street beggar.

Serwaa received tremendous emotional and social support from her parents, who saw her as able, but she suffered discrimination from her prospective husband's family, and that was where she deeply felt othered, different, and incapable. This is, however, not too surprising because in some Ghanaian communities, "the birth of a disabled child to nondisabled parents is often taken as reasonable grounds for a divorce; the father blames his wife, distances himself from the child and seeks a wife who will bear nondisabled children" (Nepveux, 2009, p. 17, see also Grischow et al, 2018).

In my view, this is one way in which the sense of 'outsideness' as argued by Elias (1994), frames everyday use of binaries such as 'same' and 'different', 'able bodies' and 'disable bodies', 'powerful' and 'powerless' within family and societal practices. The stories of other disabled women I spoke to corroborates Serwaa's position. In a conversation during fieldwork, one of them remarked, "some things never change even in your own family when you are disabled", while another simply said "if it is God's will, it shall be well one day". The reaction of the disabled women, while not entirely surprising, crowds out the more general belief that in Africa, the individual "defines himself precisely by that which he receives from others at any moment" (Zahan, 1979, p. 9). Moreover, the negative family outlook on disabled women, erodes the significance of family and society in shaping the personhood of the individual which John Mbiti describes as "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 106).

Disability and Religious Beliefs and Practices

The agency of religion in explaining discourses that frame everyday beliefs and practices about disability is quite elaborated in the literature (Devlieger, 2023; Nyangweso, 2018; Adom-Opare, 2022; Etieyibo, 2022). Ghanaians are religious, and they often employ religious beliefs to deal with challenges with disease, death and pain, including disability. At the religious level, it is believed that God or metaphysical beings interfere in the affairs of humans because the cosmos is a relational reality involving God, the ancestors, the living, animals, and the environment, and that the harmony that exists among these beings and the environment serves as a blueprint for human

relationships in the family and community. On the grounds of this understanding, most Ghanaians will do well not to upset/wrong the ancestors, God, or individuals in the community, so they may not suffer from a curse or misfortune leading to a personal disability or of their children. During fieldwork, Yaa Manu, a crippled in a wheelchair, who is a petty trader at the Madina market, shares her story;

After consulting diviners, my father concluded that my disabled condition is a punishment from the gods because of the extramarital affairs of my mother. So, from birth I was not accorded the paternal care a father must give their children. Basically, I have been 'hanging around' in the family and my mother is practically my sole caretaker. I could not go to school. I am thirty, and still dependent on my mother who is just a petty trader.

Whether Yaa Manu's situation is due to extramarital affairs of her mother or not is difficult to tell. What we would rather see in the othering of Yaa Manu, is the struggle in her own family to come to terms with the reality of her disability. Yaa Manu's story may be an individual case, but the practice of drawing on religion as a means of finding answers to the cause of her disability is quite widespread in Ghana. For example, in some Ghanaian cultures, it is believed that, when a woman commits adultery, (even though men also do), or engages in 'evil' activity, the gods may punish her for her misdeeds with a disabled child. Such children are often abandoned to die or given little parental care. Among the Ga, however, it is believed that the feeble-minded and people with a disability were a reincarnation of a deity and so were always treated in the family with great kindness, gentleness, and patience (Field, 1937/1961, p. 183).

In my view, these explanations only reinforce my argument that in Ghana, as in other African societies, because religion is more generally perceived as a problem-solving device, it is deployed as a major pathway in dealing with every challenge of life, not least disability. Adherents of different religious persuasions believe that sometimes, to avert calamities and misfortunes in the family or at one's workplace, one ought to learn to give alms or gifts to the poor or underprivileged. In fact, in Muslim dominated communities, it is believed that giving alms to disabled persons, for example, bring lots of blessings and good tidings from Allah to the giver. In urban Accra, this theocentric ethic or belief is often exploited by disabled persons who have the penchant to turn their condition into a lucrative business. This explains why some among them are refusing to yield to attempts by NGOs and other agencies to train them to be gainfully employed in the private or public sectors so that they can leave the streets.

Accessing Education as a Disabled Woman

The lack of access to education for a disabled girl or woman creates many challenging situations that produces and reinforce othering and marginalization. Fefoame (2018), a blind campaigner advocating for the rights of women with disability, writes that in Ghana, “many women with disabilities face barriers to reaching leadership roles because they are stigmatized for their gender. They are less likely to be given a good education or to be recognized for their abilities” (2018, p. 50). The story of Fefoame resonates with that of Abena Frimpomaa, a blind beggar whom I interviewed during fieldwork at Adenta;

I was told there is a school for blind people, but when I told my parents to take me there, they refused with the excuse that, they do not have money. I like to go to school, but my family is interested in the money I bring from begging on the streets.

In many parts of Ghana, despite the increase in the number of girls now in school, some parents still prefer to send the boy-child to school and not the girl-child. Patriarchal norms, cultural practices, and acts of discrimination tend to influence family and societal attitudes towards disabled people, especially women. Elsewhere in Africa, Malubiran (2021) demonstrates that, in urban Ethiopia, disabled males have better opportunities for education than their female counterparts because of “the patriarchal nature, cultural values, and negative attitude of the society as well as the low self-esteem and self-confidence of disabled people and the mistrust of their families” (2021, p. 66). In Ghana, many young girls are uneducated because it is said, they will become women, get married into another man’s house where the benefits of their education will go. The case is even more challenging for girls or women who are disabled (Fefoame, 2018). This explains why some disabled women end up in the streets as beggars or left to their fate.

In urban Accra, begging on the streets is a major way some disabled women meet their daily needs, and to resist or refuse othering by society as is also the case among ethnic minorities in Danish society as shown in the work of Jensen (2011). Thus, the marginalisation of disabled women in education does not inure to their good, because it has the potential to produce *ableist othering*, a discriminatory process where disabled students are given only the necessary academic adjustments to “get by” in the classroom and not the total support system they need to garner equal opportunity in classrooms as their nondisabled peers (cf. Reutlinger, 2015).

This said, in some traditional communities, disabled women who are healers or traditional birth attendants (TBAs) are highly respected and honoured for helping to promote traditional medicine and healing. In this

way, they unravel how othering may be resisted and provide pathways for how women’s identities and subjectivities may be redefined in a positive light. From the above, I argue that the othering of disabled women is multilayered, comprising gender, cultural and social issues, and attitudinal matters even in their own families. This being the case, othering is fundamentally a daunting challenge that freezes the potential of the disabled who are already disadvantaged by the negative perceptions of society about matters of their lifeworld and futures.

Livelihood and Disability

In the discourse about disability, Anthropologists and other social scientists have underscored the connection between livelihood and poverty, and how this negatively affects the living conditions of disabled people. Malubiran (2021) argues that stigma, discrimination, lack of access to education and negative societal attitudes complicate the livelihood challenges of disabled women just because they are women

In Ghanaian society, having a source of livelihood and working to meet one’s needs is part of the definition of a meaningful and responsible life. Not to have a source of livelihood amounts to being lazy, an act of shame, making one a laughing stock of family and society. During fieldwork, one of my participants, Lydia Osei, shared:

I get a lot of money from begging, so I offered support to my younger siblings who are in school. Because of this, my parents and other family members ignored my disability. They are happy with me because of the money I make for the family.

Grace Ohene, 45, an amputee who sells groceries at the Madina market shared during fieldwork,

I do not make much from my daily sales to cater for my two children and myself, but I prefer that to begging. My husband died some years ago. So, it is difficult for us. But I am doing small, small to survive.

The above narrative of the two disabled women reveals a certain ‘double’ related to how disability is sometimes understood within family discourse. While Grace Ohene, endeavors to resist othering by working to improve her living conditions, Lydia Osei on the other hand, is encouraged not to mind the indignities she suffers as a beggar, but to deploy her disability in a manner to ensure that she brings money home. What this amounts to is the commodification of disability for money or material gain. Kassah, (2008) has argued that begging has become a major source of livelihood for many disabled women because of poverty, stigmatization, lack of knowledge about job opportunities open to them and how to access these opportunities.

But this is little wonder because a study conducted by Naami (2015) shows that, in Ghana, unemployment rates for women are lower compared to their male counterparts. The differential levels are even bigger for disabled women, as they make the effort to seek employment in the government or private sector. The possibilities of accessing soft loans and credit facilities are in most cases not available to disabled women (and sometimes men) so they are unable to leverage their potential to gain sustainable livelihoods. They lack the ability to enter the job market because of poor education and the absence of skill sets for employment. Many of the disabled women I interviewed during fieldwork, do not have any social mobility aspirations because they do not see any such possibility in the given situation in which they find themselves. These social challenges constitute some of the ways in which disabled women are othered, making them feel marginalized and inferior compared to their able-bodied counterparts who feel superior and can access jobs and other livelihood opportunities.

Othering and the complexities of accessing healthcare

In Ghana, health needs of disabled people, not least women seem not to receive the needed attention as compared to the nondisabled (Badu et al, 2016 & Acheampo et al, 2022). Health is a major priority in all societies and in many developed societies policies privileging the needs of disabled people are well embedded in state and local level health structures. This seems not to be the case in Ghana, (and perhaps in many parts of Africa) where the disabled suffer from many health challenges or deprivations. For example, Badu et al, (2016) and Acheampo et al, (2022) opine that othering or the exclusionary attitude displayed towards women/people with disability is perpetuated and reinforced by physical, mental, and verbal abuse from healthcare givers in health institutions.

During fieldwork, Kubura Alhassan, a blind woman with a child shared;

Anytime I go to the clinic with my daughter or myself, the nurses know I have challenges with my sight, but they will be shouting at me as though you are not human. They do not care about my condition. Sometimes, I also raise my voice to say I do not like that and then they will stop.

The reaction of Kubura, brings to the fore, how some healthcare givers who are supposed to assist the sick and the disabled access healthcare are themselves 'disabled' by their negative attitude towards the disabled. This is unsurprising because Ganle et al, (2016) have shown in their work that, in Ghana, little attention is given to the sexual and reproductive health needs to disabled women because they are thought not to be sexually active and so are less likely to marry or

have children. In many ways, this happens because of "the assumption that people with disabilities are intrinsically inferior and unable to take responsibility for their own lives" (Charlton, 2000, p. 53). Obviously, this thinking is erroneous, and yet it feeds into the culture of othering in which disabled women are framed as inferior and a nuisance, sometimes in their own families.

My observation during fieldwork, shows that, the anonymity and evasiveness of urban social spaces and life, more broadly expressed through neglect, indifference, and lack of belonging tends to produce othering in multiple ways. Labelling people as "disabled" is not because they are handicapped or have impairments; it is largely because of a discourse of power, socially and culturally constructed and reinforced over time by the powerful in this case the nondisabled, to render the disabled powerless. In this way, disability becomes "exclusionary, stigmatizing, and anti-transformational. As such it embodies imperfection, incapacitation, and inferiority" (Basotho, Leshota, & Sesotho, 2020, p. 1).

Until a few years ago, only a small number of public buildings, healthcare centers and other workplaces catered for the needs of disabled people. Disabled people do not seem to be essential to the organization of space and place. In a way, these deprivations reinforce practices of othering thereby placing disabled women in a state of vulnerability and subordination. The 1992 Ghana constitution gave some attention to needs of people living with disabilities. But, because of lack of commitment on the part of government this effort did not go far. It was rather the Persons with Disability Act (Act 715) passed in 2006, by the Ghanaian parliament that really highlighted the rights and needs of disabled people. However, government's feeble attempt at promoting the bill has stunted the rights and privileges of disabled people (Mfoafo-M'Carthy, Grischow, & Stocco, 2020).

We are part of the family: Going Beyond Othering

In their work on rethinking disability in Ghanaian society, Gariba and Assenyoh (2023) argued that, to go beyond the negativities such as the othering of disabled persons, society must be seen to be "mainstreaming, renormalization or re-symbolization of disability beginning with a deconstruction of the stigma, stereotype, and other socio-cultural constructions associated with disability which dehumanize people with disability" (p. 59). This will promote a sense of belonging and erode social practices that reinforce negative expressions of disability.

A major path to deconstructing disabling practices of disability is language. This is so because "language informs attitudes and beliefs because it is a medium of

translation of expression and thought. When a word or idea is expressed, an image is generated” (Charlton 2000, p. 66). To transcend practices of othering, negative language that stigmatizes or makes the disabled feel powerless, especially in the family, should be replaced with language that is more inclusive and promotes a sense of belonging. This is what we find in the story of Oforiwa, mentioned above, who resisted negative language and stigma by becoming a campaigner fighting discrimination and abuse of disabled women who are deprived of education.

Additionally, in Ghana, as in other African societies, the most reliable source of social and economic support for persons is the family. To be deprived of family support, is to be stripped of one’s base of identity and rootedness. Hannah Dzifa, a physically challenged person, for example, resisted othering from her community members through refusal by relying on family support that offered her the opportunity to learn a trade and not to go begging on the streets. In this way, disabled women will experience an abundance of life and survive because the family supports them in ways that cannot be met otherwise. During fieldwork, some of my informants lamented that their impoverished condition is not so much about their physical impairment or disability but family neglect, discrimination, violence, and disrespect. These negative attitudes emerge because “although human beings have a natural tendency to make categorical distinctions, the categories themselves and meanings associated with those categories are socially constructed rather than natural” (Powell and Menendian, 2016, p. 24).

In his work among the Yaka of southwestern Congo, Rene Devisch (1993) describes how the *mbwoolu* and *khita* cults address issues of disability. He mentioned that people with various forms of disability- albinos, polio, joint pains, blindness, and so on, go through an initiation process that transforms them from disabled, ‘abnormal’ persons to abled, ‘normal’ persons both as individuals and as a collection. The essence of the ritual “is not that a cure is necessarily achieved but that the impaired person and the community are healed in a new understanding of the meaning of deficiency” (Ingstad & White, 1995, p. 272). Transitional rituals of this kind are also found in Ghanaian cultures and could be employed by families and society to shape and reshape the attitudes of stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes directed at disabled women.

The narrative of rethinking disability is not only about empowering individual disabled people, but to challenge existing systems of ableism that afflict disabled and able-bodied alike. African socialism or communalism dictates that discrimination must be disregarded, and a culture of belonging and

inclusiveness must be encouraged at all times. This is so because a family or society cannot be said to be a place of belonging based only on joys, wealth, happiness and prosperity and general goodness while neglecting sickness, sorrow, and sufferings of the disabled people.

Moreover, the built environment also has a huge impact on the way that disabled women in society experience barriers to their full participation and belonging to society. Inaccessible environments tend to create disability by creating differential use of physical and social spaces that disadvantage the disabled. Ghana does not lack legislations about how to treat disabled people as mentioned above. What is rather lacking is the implementation of the constitutional provisions which will empower disabled people, not least women to know their rights and to make sure they are enforced. The needs of disabled women must be factored into the organisation of space and place, transport and education, among others.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that disability is a fluid, shifting and ambiguous phenomenon whose values, meanings and interpretations conflict with the beliefs and practices of daily life. This is so because the attitudes of the majority in the family and society are still deeply embedded in cultural practices that, more generally, reinforce stigmatization, exclusion, and othering. Othering devalues the value of respect and responsibility for the other and makes humans inhuman in the sense that it makes the state of being with and for the other unimportant (Kewanian, Creely, & Southcott, 2023). While the lens through which I examine the life of disabled women is othering, the socio-cultural factors that might have created understandings of the condition of disability should not be neglected (Hall, 2015). This is so because the rights and opportunities of disabled people are still very much articulated through non-disabled people and very minimally through the disabled themselves. This posture is one way of how othering is created and reinforced by persons who claim to have full complements of abled bodies while defining others who because they are ‘differently abled’ as disabled. People with a disability should be given the right or social space to be differently abled. This is a challenge, and any attempt to improve individual and community understanding about disability must face up to this challenge.

This paper has also demonstrated that cultural norms and values about disabled people, especially women, are rather diverse and complex, revealing the social struggles in society to come to terms with the reality of disability. While in some families disabled women are

accepted and protected, in others they are rejected and somehow perceived as inferior others because they cannot do what ‘abled’ bodies do. In actuality, however, the reality of “ability and disability are not so much a matter of the capacities and limitations of bodies but more about what we expect from a body at a particular moment and place” (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 524). It is this expectation of a disabled person ‘to act and do’ things as a ‘body’ that exposes everyday othering to which some refuse, while others succumb.

There is no doubt that religion, in the different forms in which it is expressed is strong among Ghanaians and often relied on by people to find meaning in challenging life situations including disability. Religion in itself is unproblematic, but it can become unproductive when families rely on diviners, mallams or pastors to find answers to ‘how’ and ‘why’ a family member is disabled. The religious landscape is a complex one and often provides multiple meanings to the same phenomenon. This means that, religious beliefs and practices can complicate understandings about disability and sometimes make families to accept or other the disabled because of reliance on the ‘prophecies’ of a diviner or pastor. Religion can fester and disorient understandings about disability, and care must be taken in dwelling on religious faith and practice.

Furthermore, I believe that whatever distinctions we make between ‘disabled’ and ‘abled’ persons would be difficult to dispel or do away with in society. Presently, it appears that, despite increased national and global awareness about the welfare of disabled people, especially women, the distinctions are getting even more pronounced because of the over medicalization of the body and the contemporary theories and logics about the body/self, intersubjectivity and intercorporeality (Van Wolputte 2004). Sayings such as ‘you are your body’ and ‘your body is the temple of your mind’, tend to overemphasis bodyliness over other dimensions of the human person such that if one were disabled, one would most probably be imaged as having an ‘uncompleted’ body- one that cannot be the mind of the body and so ‘spoiled’ (Douglas, 1963).

Additionally, this paper has contributed to our understanding of the many ways in which othering is expressed in relation to the lives of disabled women and how some find overt or covert ways to refuse othering, sometimes in their own families. The family is the most basic social institution of every society, offering social and economic support to its members. At the same time, as this paper has demonstrated, a family can, by their actions and inactions, perpetuate othering through exclusionary rather than inclusionary practices that enhance the belongingness of disabled women in the family. When a disabled woman feels

less belonged to her family, she begins ‘having complexes’, i.e. “a bundle of negative emotions including personal frustrations, preoccupations, jealousy and shame” (Devlieger, 2022, p. 504).

Finally, I tend to believe that, more generally, it is not “an impairment that creates a disability, but rather the incompatibility of impaired bodies with social norms and material environments that are determined by the able-bodied majority, and the discrimination that frequently follows” (Devlieger, 2018, p. 1-2). In this sense, disability is a culturally constructed discourse that objectifies situations, issues, values, persons, and relationships. This said, I argue that, the othering of disabled women in the family and society, is nothing less than a manifestation of a society that has disabled itself and not disabled persons by the social and cultural borders/barriers it has set or built. Thus, a pedagogy of rethinking or re-imaging disabled women, must start with a conscious deconstruction of the social, cultural, political and religious barriers that create othering and rendering disabled women powerless, marginalized and stigmatized. Through this, disabled women may have the social space to represent themselves in ways that reflect their aspirations, hopes, anxieties and futures.

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