DISABILITY
AND
THE MEDIA

How disability is dealt with in West African media

Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo

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Today, the messages relayed by the media worldwide (press, television, radio, Internet) have a huge influence on society. The media are a lever for behaviour change in society regarding disability issues. The words and images used in the media have a direct positive or negative impact on the lives of people with disabilities (PWDs). By choosing not to ignore the existence of persons with disabilities but rather portray them in a manner that reflects the reality and emphasizes their qualities instead of dwelling on the disability, the media can help show a positive image of persons with disabilities.

Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) should therefore use the media as a strategic vehicle to disseminate reliable, diverse and inclusive information, including the rights of persons with disabilities.

Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities says that “States Parties undertake to adopt immediate, effective and appropriate measures to combat stereotypes, prejudices...” about PWDs. To this end, they must “promote positive perceptions and greater social awareness towards persons with disabilities”, by “encouraging all organs of the media to portray persons with disabilities in a manner consistent with the purpose of the present Convention”.

Today, the coverage of disability issues in the media in West Africa conveys, in most cases, stereotypes about people with disabilities. The terminology used is often incorrect (confusion of terms), even derogatory. Some types of disability are overrepresented (physical disability), while others are rarely mentioned (mental disability, rare disabilities). Although the specific needs of children with disabilities are mentioned, including education, few articles concern women, despite the fact that they are especially vulnerable to discrimination because of their gender and their disability.

Many journalists still present disability in the light of charity, where people with disabilities (PWDs) are victims, dependent persons who need assistance, and often with a dramatic tone to appeal to the compassion of the reader. In other cases, it’s the sensational aspect of PWDs that is highlighted, presenting them as heroes, notwithstanding the disabling situation. In addition, most articles are rather short and talk about PWDs in general, and they hardly collect the personal stories of PWDs or their families. The few photos shown are taken during donations by authorities or NGOs.

Yet, the main source of information remains the associations and federations of PWDs. They therefore have the opportunity to convey a correct, objective and inclusive message on the situation of PWDs. Furthermore, half of the articles deal with the rights of PWDs, which proves that the rights-based approach is getting into the media agenda, even if few articles refer to specific legislation on the rights of PWDs. Now, the role of Disabled People’s Organizations is to concentrate their efforts in this direction, to raise awareness and help the media achieve quality coverage on disability issues.

Study framework

The survey involved national media organs in the 6 countries of the DECISIPH project: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. In total, more than 60 articles from the press and electronic newspapers between 2008 and 2010 were analysed.
Methodology

The methodology used to conduct the study is qualitative and quantitative. The data collection tool is a common questionnaire (see Appendix) used for analysing newspaper articles. It is semi-structured and has 3 main sections:
- Disability terminology;
- Form and content of the article;
- Proposals.

Additional information was gathered by similar studies already conducted in other countries, as well as individual interviews with journalists and members of the Secretariat of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities.

The data provided important indications on the correct terminology to be used by journalists to refer to persons with disabilities, and ways to establish partnerships between Disabled People’s Organizations and media organs.

Terminology

The terminology used by journalists play a vital role in terms of social behaviour vis-à-vis people with disabilities, as it can create or reinforce clichés about them. The main finding of this study is that various terms are used to refer to PWDs, which causes confusion in the information conveyed. In addition, the expressions used are often inaccurate and sometimes pejorative.

The two expressions most often used to refer to PWDs in the titles of articles are:
- *The handicapped*: PWDs find this term rather derogatory, because it reduces them to objects, not people. Moreover, it focuses on the disability and not on the person.

In almost all articles, journalists use several expressions to talk about PWDs. Here again, the two most used are:
- *The handicapped*;
- *Persons with disabilities*.

Many other terms are also used: “person living with any type of disability, person with a deficiency, persons with disabilities, person affected by a disability, the disabled, disabled person, person in a disabling situation”. The confusion between “deficiency”, “incapacity” and “disability” is recurrent in many articles.

Some articles refer to persons without disabilities:
- By mentioning the absence of impairment: “the healthy, the hearing, the sighted, the non-disabled, the able-bodied”,
- By categorizing them separately: “the others”, those who lead a “normal life”.

Physical disability is the type of disability most often mentioned by journalists (2/3 of the articles).

The two terms most commonly used to refer to people with physical disabilities are:
- *Persons with physical disabilities*;
- *Persons with mobility impairment*.

Many other words are often found in the same article: "person with a motor disability, person with a wheelchair, cripple, physically disabled, physically impaired, person with
orthopaedic problems”. One article talks of “destitute persons with leprosy-bitten limbs” and “polio martyrs”. This subjective and dramatic language contributes to the stigmatization of PWDs as victims and dependents.

Visual impairment is the second type of disability most often addressed in the articles. Although the term “visually impaired” is the most used, many other terms are recurrent: “visually handicapped, blind, visual disabilities, people with blindness, people with visual impairment, blind persons, persons with visual disabilities”.

Some articles address the issue of hearing impairment (deaf-mutes, deaf persons, deaf, hearing impaired, people with a hearing disability, hearing loss). Few articles deal with mental or psychological disability (cognitive impairment, mental disability, people with mental disabilities, mentally retarded people). Some articles mention albinism (albino, people who lack melanin, pouné [pejorative word in Wolof]) and leprosy (lepers). An article talks about short people; another addresses stuttering as a particular type of disability.

The use of derogatory terms (retarded person, pouné), incorrect terms, as well as the multiplicity of the terms used show the lack of knowledge or the total ignorance of journalists as far as disability is concerned, and sometimes a lack of objectivity (personal opinions).

Disability causes

Very few articles mention the cause of the disability. However, the medical cause is most often mentioned, although no medical detail is really given. Several articles talk about the mystical nature of people with albinism (traditional beliefs, a punishment by the pangolin), but insist that it is a false and ridiculous belief that we must condemn.

An article explains the divine origin of disability (God created all men, including persons with disabilities). Although the medical origin is the only one that journalists support, we see that people continue to view disability as a divine and / or mystical phenomenon, especially as regards albinism.

Disability models

Half the articles adopt the rights-based disability model, explaining that it is society that must provide all the conditions ensuring that the rights of all, including PWDs, are respected. Some titles highlight the rights of persons with disabilities:

In Burkina Faso: “Taking into account the disability dimension in development programs”
In Senegal: “Advocacy for access to information for deaf people”
In Togo: “ABEA sensitizes NGOs on the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities”

However, in nearly one third of the articles, the charity model is put forward. PWDs are then presented as victims, incapable and dependent people who need assistance. Many titles appeal to the mercy of the reader:

In Burkina Faso: ”Access to public buildings in Burkina Faso: the plight of the disabled"
In Mali: ”This woman needs solidarity: abandoned by her husband, she has 5 children, 4 of which are blind."
In Niger: Distribution of meals to vulnerable people in the neighbourhood of Koirat-Teguia: an act of solidarity of the Magama Foundation towards people in need"
The medical and social models are seldom mentioned. Two articles present disability from the religious point of view, where persons with disabilities are regarded as creatures of God, like any other human being.

In Burkina Faso, the director of a denominational humanitarian foundation explains: "Children are a gift from God and we must take care of them". The representative of another denominational mission says: “This is a sign that God speaks to everyone, even to the blind”.

**Tone of the article**

While the tone and vocabulary used in most articles are fairly neutral, some articles are rather dramatic and present PWDs as victims in need of help (various hindrances to the development of families, life turned into a nightmare, women abandoned by their husbands). All these articles adopt the charity model of disability.

Others, on the other hand, stand out for their sensational style, portraying PWDs as persons who manage to succeed despite their disability (a girl who does not give up, a man who can do everything, who his physically strong, makes significant sacrifices, is psychologically resilient).

One article uses a really negative vocabulary, with a rather alarming tone. PWDs are presented as "cheaters" (in the labour market), who prepare tricks in order to succeed". The tone and vocabulary used by the journalist can be explained by the lack of objectivity on his part, but also by his ignorance of the right to the non-discrimination of PWDs in employment.

**Content and form**

The vast majority of articles speak of PWDs in general, in the form of reports that are less than a half-page long. Some longer articles (more than one page) present a particular story, either through an interview (career success, NGO head, story of a young disabled girl) or through a description of a PWD (social and professional success of an albino singer, life story). Two articles make the front. They refer to actions of Ministries in favour of PWDs. One article, which is two pages long, describes the visit of the President of the Republic to a Disabled People's Organization.

**Photos**

More than half the articles include a photo, but most of them have no caption. The articles dealing with a personal story almost always show a photo of the PWD portrayed in the story. Almost all articles mentioning the actions of authorities for PWDs (donations, meetings) show a photo of the authorities. Other pictures show leaders of NGOs or DPOs. One article shows a pictogram representing a PWD in a wheelchair. Although this article talks about women with disabilities in general, the inclusion of such a symbol reinforces the idea that, when talking about disabled women, we only address women with physical disabilities, thus ignoring women with sensory disabilities (visual or hearing impairment), mental disabilities, or any other form of disability (women with, albinism, dwarfism...).

**Subjects covered**

The most recurrent themes in the articles are related to disability rights. They talk about disability rights in general, but also about certain specific basic rights such as the right to education, health, vocational training and employment. Other articles address accessibility (transport, buildings, information), autonomy, and equality with people without disabilities. However, nearly half the articles are oriented toward the solidarity and humanitarian assistance that should be given to PWDs (donations in kind, given them money), because of the social exclusion and discrimination they face. Several articles also deal with the health
problems that PWDs encounter and the medical measures to be taken or that have been taken to resolve them.

Journalists lay emphasis on children with disabilities. They focus mainly on their right to education, the need for education in sign language for deaf children, and taking into account the specificities of children with albinism and mental disabilities. Very few articles address the issue of women with disabilities, even though they are the most vulnerable and are doubly discriminated against because of their gender and their disability.

Sources

More than two-thirds of the journalists have used a single source for writing their article. However, the multiplicity of sources is the first criterion for quality, broad and independent information. **Associations (local and national) and federations of persons with disabilities are the main source of information for journalists.** This finding is an essential element to be taken into account by the DPOs as regards the impact they have on the media, and the quality and quantity of the information they provide. Since most actions by DPOs are undertaken in collaboration with NGOs (which specialize in disability or not), journalists often interview the representatives of these NGOs too.

Other sources are also used by a minority of journalists: public authorities (during donations by ministries or local authorities), laws (referring specifically to the rights of persons with disabilities), and PWDs themselves (individual stories, profiles and interviews). A disabled child and the mother of another disabled child speak about their difficulties in everyday life. Very few articles present stories of professionals in direct contact with PWDs (medical or educational professionals, social workers). No articles have sought the opinion and views of the general population on disability issues.
1. **Within DPOs:**

* Improve the **representation** of people with different types of disabilities, women with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities so that the media, in their contacts with DPOs, are sensitive to all types of disabilities (physical, sensory, mental, psychological and other disabilities) and to the special needs of women and children with disabilities.

* Promote the **participation of persons with disabilities**:
  - At events that attract the media;
  - At events hosted by human rights organizations or other groups representing marginalized and vulnerable social groups;
  - When participating in events (which are not necessarily specific to PWDs), encourage PWDs to speak with the media, highlight their participation as citizens, without necessarily referring to their disability.
  - **Inclusive events**: at events, invite all disability stakeholders, targeting authorities in particular (local government authorities), since the media is more likely to cover an event attended by these authorities.

* Within each DPO, appoint a **reference person** in charge of communication with the media. He/she will be the link between the DPO and the media and will monitor the coverage of disability by media organs. This person may, for instance, review articles before publication, or comment on an article written by a journalist when the rights-based approach is not respected or the correct terminology is not used, and then request corrections.

2. **Establish partnerships between:**

* DPOs and networks of journalists working on disability;
* DPOs and journalists from different media organs (print media, television, radio, internet)

* Objectives of the partnerships: **Encourage** journalists to involve in disability issues. **Enhance / improve** journalists' knowledge on these issues by organizing awareness sessions and training for journalists.

* In partnership with journalists, develop a code of conduct on how disability should be presented:
  - Terminology: produce a **dictionary of disability** and agree on the correct terminology to refer to people with disabilities and the different types of disabilities
  - Model: raise awareness about the importance of the rights-based model of disability. Promote a positive image of persons with disabilities, which is not based on the charity model (PWD = victim) or on the medical model (PWD = patient)
  - Publicize the specifics of the situation of women disabilities (double discrimination) and children with disabilities (adapted lessons in sign language, Braille...)
  - Advise on legislation on the rights of PWDs (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, national laws, decrees...)
  - Sensitize journalists on sign language and Braille
* Propose **situation scenarios** to journalists so that they become better aware of the difficulties that the environment poses for PWDs: blindfolded course, wheelchair use, communicating without words…

* Organize days of **visit to media organs** for PWDs (radio stations, newspapers and television) to the awareness of media stakeholders on the importance of physical access (transport, buildings) and access to communication / information (news in sign language, Braille printouts of articles...).

* Suggest **ideas for topics and reports** to journalists:
  - Promote PWDs and insist on their rights;
  - Show the diversity of disability: highlight the types of disabilities that are not often talked about (hearing impairment, mental disability, rare disabilities);
  - Propose interviews directly with PWDs and their families, to give news reports a more personal character. Submit stories of children with disabilities, women with disabilities and their families and entourage;
  - Propose photos that show PWDs participating in social life (and not sordid images, or images about donations): disabled child at school, disabled parent who cares for children, PWDs at work, interacting with people without disabilities...;
  - Propose story topics that have nothing to do with disability but involve PWDs;

* Organize press conferences: present the DPO, its vision, actions, events planned, and provide concrete information on disability (legislation, contact details, literature ...)

3. Employment of persons with disabilities in the media sector

* To present a better image of PWDs, it is necessary that they have better access to the media and more opportunities in this sector. Disabled People’s Organizations must work together to identify members with the skills and qualifications necessary to be **employed** in the fields of communication and the media, and help them to get hired. This may also require advocacy for the integration of **disabled students** in schools for training in communication and the media, and the integration of **trainees with disabilities** in media organs.

* In DPOs, identify experts on disability issues (sociologists, social workers, educational and medical professionals...) and help them approach media professionals.

4. Inclusion of disability in schools of journalism

* Advocacy for **training modules on disability**: To ensure the sustainability of the training of journalists on disability issues, it is essential to get involved directly with schools of journalism and propose training modules on disability for students in communication and journalism. Such actions in schools will not only make it possible to target a larger number of future journalists, but will also provide the opportunity to address disability not as a separate element, but as an integral part of the training of journalists.

* **Educate teachers** on disability issues
The media have an important role to play in changing the way people with disabilities are perceived in society, through the dissemination / publication of factual, objective and inclusive reports.
FOR A BETTER HANDLING OF DISABILITY IN THE MEDIA

Correct terminology:
Person with a disability
Person with a physical or motor disability (paralysis, dwarfism...)
Person with a sensory disability (auditory or visual impairment)
Visually impaired person
Hearing impaired person
Person with an intellectual disability (Trisomy 21...)
Short-statured person (dwarfism)
Person with albinism

Definitions:
**Impairment** = loss or dysfunction (temporary or permanent) in one or more parts of the body (genetic abnormalities, limb loss...)
**Incapacity** = inability for a person to undertake certain daily life activities or actions (mobility problem, communication problem)
**Disability** = activity limitation or restriction of social participation that a person is faced with in his environment
**Persons with disabilities** = include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Article 1, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)

Rights-based disability model:
The rights-based model is a model that recognizes disability as an inherent aspect of human diversity in society.
Persons with disabilities have rights, like all human beings.
It falls to society to ensure that the rights of all, including people with disabilities, are respected.

Girls and women with disabilities
Victims of double discrimination because of their gender and their disability
Sexual violence against girls and women with disabilities, forced marriage, early pregnancy
Problems of access to education, employment, health, land...

Children with disabilities
Marginalization, desertion
School education to be adapted taking into account the child’s disability:
- Sign language, Braille
- Inclusive education or specialized institution...
Appendix

RESEARCH: HOW IS DISABILITY PORTRAYED IN WEST-AFRICAN MEDIAS?
Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo

Questionnaire
Country : Sierra Leone

Filled in by : Project manager
Federation
Journalist
Other (precise) :

Newspaper name : Date of publication :

➢ **Terminology used for disability and PwD (Person with Disability):** (several answers possible)

1. What are the words used in the title? .................................................................

2. What are the words used in the article?
The handicapped
The disabled
The disabled person
People with disability
Person with disability
Other answer: .................................................................................................

3. What are the words used to talk about PwD?
The others
Normal
Person without disability
Other answer: .................................................................................................

4. What are the words used to talk about different types of impairments?
Physical impairments:
Sensory impairments (blind, deaf and mute):
Intellectual/mental impairments:
Other answer: .................................................................................................

5. If the origin of the disability is mentioned, what explanation is given? (describe it)
Mystical origin:
Divine origin:
Medical origin:
Other origin: .................................................................................................
6. Which model of disability is presented (give an example)?
Charity model (the PwD are victims, unable and dependent people who need help):

Medical model (the PwD are patients whose problems need to be treated):

Social model (social or/and environmental barriers lead people in a situation of incapacity):

Rights-based model (the society must protect the rights of PwD):

7. What is the general feeling depicted by the article (note the vocabulary)?
Dramatic (PwD are victims): .................................................................
Alarming (PwD are dangerous): ..........................................................
Sensational (PwD are heroes): ...........................................................
Humorous (PwD are ridiculous): .........................................................
Other: ................................................................................................

8. Is the article rather:
Positive
Negative
Neutral

9. According to you, why is the terminology used to talk about disability and PwD discriminatory/pejorative?
The author is not objective.
The author does not know matters related to disability.
The author is not competent.
Other reason: ..............................................................................

➢ Form and content of the article:

10. What is the title of the article? ............................................................

11. Is the author a PwD? ........................................................................

12. What space is committed to the article?
The front page
Less than half a page
Half a page
A page
More than a page

13. Which form has the article?
Report
Interview
Portrait
Investigation
Opinion
News in brief
Questions/answers
Other: ........................................

14. Is the article together with a picture or drawing?
Caption: ...........................................................................................

12
15. What are the sources of the article’s information? (several answers possible)

PwD
Association/federation of PwD
Local authorities/government
Professionnals: medical attendants, social workers, teachers
Legislative texts
Other: .................................................................

16. What is the main subject of the article?

Accessibility/mobility/transports
Money/begging
Culture/arts
Human rights
Education/formation
Employment
Environment
Family
Leisure
Media/Information and Communication technology
Other subject: ..............................................

17. Does the article talk about:

Women with disabilities:
Children with disabilities:
Old people with disabilities:
Other: .................................................................

18. Does the article relate an individual story or talk about PwD in general?
.................................................................

➢ Propositions :

19. According to you, what could journalists possibly do to give a more objective image and information on PwD?
.................................................................
.................................................................
.................................................................

20. What are the missing elements to reach it?
.................................................................
.................................................................
.................................................................

Further comments :
.................................................................
.................................................................
.................................................................