



Research Article

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Inclusion in Sport: An Exploration of the Participation of People Living with Disabilities in Sport

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Abstract

Background: Participation in sport is a fundamental human right [1]. Participation in sports by people living with disabilities (PWDs) presents several mental, physical social and emotional benefits. However, it has been observed that the participation of PWDs in sport and physical activity is generally less as compared to their able bodied counterparts [2]. **Aim:** The aim of the study was to explore the participation of PWDs in Paralympic games. **Objectives:** The objectives of the study were to identify the level of participation of PWD in sports, barriers that impede the participation and strategies that can be used to enhance their participation. **Setting:** The study explored the participation of people living with disabilities (PWD) in sport (Paralympic Games) in Gokwe south district in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. It focused on exploring barriers that impede the effective participation of People living with disabilities (PWDs). **Materials and Methods:** The study adopted a mixed methods research approach utilizing the embedded (nested) mixed method design within the traditional descriptive survey design. Structured interviews and observations were used as to collect data. The research participants comprised PWDs aged 15 years and above. The random sampling method was used to select a sample of sixty PWDs. **Statistical analysis:** Data was integrated into frequency tables and graphs and was textually interpreted to derive meaning from it. **Results:** The study revealed that access to sport by people with a disability was a major challenge. Lack of awareness, Severity of disability, inadequate funding, poor transport, lack of support from significant others, lack of appreciation of the value of sport, poor and inadequate assistive devices, poor training equipment and the role of the sports trainer were found to be the major factors limiting access to sport participation by PWDs. **Recommendations:** It was recommended that both governmental and nongovernmental organizations should provide adequate resources for the Paralympic games. It was also recommended that both government agencies and disability rights advocates should increase awareness on the importance of participation in sport by people with disabilities.

Keywords: People with disabilities, Sport, PARALYMPIC games, Participation.

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations International Charter on Physical Education and Sport, Physical Education and Sport are a basic human right [2]. In the context of this charter it follows that the importance of sport for people with disabilities can therefore never be overemphasized. Sport is a tool which can be used for effective socialization thereby placing everyone on an equal social footing [2]. While social exclusion is unavoidable in society sport can assist by modifying societal mindset, feeling and attitude towards PWDs [3]. On the other hand, sport can also change how PWDs perceive themselves [3]. A typical example is that of Chou Li who observed that prior to the Beijing Paralympic games a big component of the estimated 19 million PWDs in China were being segregated socially [3]. However, Chou Li acknowledges witnessing first hand that the Beijing Paralympic games transformed the status quo for PWDs and their families by presenting them with positive social inclusion opportunities [3]. It was observed that over the past half century Sports for PWD (Paralympic games) have played a significant role in modifying the attitudes towards disability and speeding up the social inclusion agenda [4].

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has made significant contributions towards the promotion of competitive Sport as well as in safeguarding and promoting the rights of PWD [5]. In the same context the Sports and Recreation Commission introduced Zimbabwe National Paralympic Games (ZNPG) in 2008 [6]. The Sport and Recreation Commission (SRC) introduced the ZNPG in order to promote active participation in competitive sports among PWD and to promote social inclusion [6]. The ZNPG brings together athletes and officials from the ten administrative provinces of Zimbabwe in a three-day sporting extravaganza. The ZNPG are used as the platform to select athletes for the International Paralympics [6].

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Despite the ZNPG being the major platform for persons with a disability to participate in sport, the games have failed to attract all PWD. A significant number of PWDs still do not take part and this is especially so in Gokwe south district in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. One therefore wonders why the situation is like that and hence the need for this empirical study. The study aimed at answering the following empirical questions:

- a) What are the barriers which impede the effective participation of PWDs in the ZNPGs in Gokwe south district?
- b) What strategies can be used to promote the effective participation of PWD's participation in the ZNPGs in Gokwe south district?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Participation in sports by people living with disabilities

The participation of PWDs is regarded as generally less when compared to their able bodied counterparts [5]. Their participation tends to vary depending on issues such as the prevailing circumstances, available incentives, barriers and PWDs' own personal factors [5]. Boland (2005) [7] describes a study which was conducted by Sport England in 1999. The study surveyed children with a disability in the United Kingdom and concluded that in almost all cases children with disabilities' participation was less than their non- disabled counterparts [7]. Another study discovered that the proportion of a sample of young people with intellectual disabilities who participated in sport was substantially less than a corresponding sample of young people from the mainstream population [2]. The type and level of disability is also believed to have implications on participation in sports [7]. People with learning disabilities and those with profound and multiple disabilities are cited as examples as categories having the lowest levels of participation [7]. Another study found that 39% of a group of 101 Canadian adolescents with physical disabilities reported that they never had a chance to participate in the Paralympics [5]. Another school of thought differs by saying that participation can be low even among those with mild or moderate disability [8]. However, a number of authorities have reported on various studies which were carried out in different locations which all seem to suggest general low levels of sport participation by PWD [5].

Barriers impeding the effective participation of people with disabilities in sport

Literature reviewed indicated the fact that all people experience barriers to sport and physical activity participation however PWD tend to experience more barriers [2, 7, 9, 10]. A study carried out by the Market research bureau of Scotland found that people with disabilities were significantly more restricted in their social life and in getting out and about than non-disabled people [7]. A local sports partnership in Canada explored rates of participation in sports and barriers that impede participation by persons with disabilities [10]. The study identified that lack of transport and lack of local facilities were reported by 50% of the respondents as the main barriers which impedes participation [10]. Reference is also made to a needs assessment survey which was conducted by The Kerry Network of PWD which identified barriers to participation as applying to all disabilities and across all social venues such as the gym, sports field, or swimming pool [5]. The barriers included transportation, the absence of a companion or company and negative attitudes towards people with disability in the context of participation in sports [5].

Sports trainers for PWDs are also believed to play a significant part in enhancing participation [10]. In most cases trainers possess a positive

attitude to the integration of children and adolescent with disabilities [10]. However, they are aware of shortcomings in their own training, leading to problems in ascertaining the individual needs of children and adolescents with physical disabilities [11]. In addition, the role of the trainers also has a significant influence on the socialization process of the disabled individual child or adolescent, as a result of the fact that the trainer and the sport participants often develop a close and personal relation [12].

Sherril (1993) [13] provides a list of some of the factors that that influence the participation of PWD in sport as parents' interest in physical activity, parental exercise habit, parental encouragement, social relationships, and satisfactory physical activity experiences in school, the local environment, participation in organised sport and playing sport at school. In a study on ethnic minority students in Scotland the following factors were identified, the attitude and expectations of significant others, particularly parents and teachers, cultural traditions including lack of acceptance of the value of sport, particularly compared to other aspect of life such as earning a living and family commitments and lack of role models a higher level [7].

Research has shown that in situations where barriers have been significantly reduced and participation as well as quality of experience facilitated, participation rates have tended to increase. In spite of the fact that several studies have emphasized the significance of sport participation for PWD, a few studies have been conducted with regard to the factors that affect the participation of PWD in the Paralympics in less developed countries [10].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This was a pragmatic and humanistic study justifying the use of a variety of methods. The study therefore adopted a mixed methods research approach. The embedded (nested) mixed methods research design was used [14, 15]. The embedded or nested design is a mixed methods research design which involves collecting and analyzing mostly quantitative data using a traditional quantitative design but with a qualitative element being embedded to the quantitative design or vice versa [14, 15]. In this study the traditional quantitative design used to collect quantitative data was the descriptive survey design while a qualitative strand was imbedded making use open ended questions and observations.

The population of the study comprised of persons living with disabilities who were 15 years and above and residing in Gokwe south district in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe in ward 10 and 11. The population was extracted from databases at Gokwe south district hospital rehabilitation department and the social services department. Convenience sampling was used to select the two wards. Random sampling was used to select sixty PWDs. The study used structured interviews and observations. The interviews were used to gather data from the PWDs most of whom are illiterate. The observation method was used to establish the condition of sport infrastructure used by PWDs in the focus district.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Quantitative data was integrated into simple frequency tables and graphs displaying frequencies of occurrence and percentages. The data was then textually interpreted to derive meaning from it. Qualitative data from observations was:

- segmented,
- coded and
- categorized into sub themes.

RESULTS

Table 1: The level of awareness of ZNPG

No	Item	YES		NO		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Are you aware of the ZNPG held in your district?	20	33	40	67	60	100

N=60

Participation in the ZNPGs

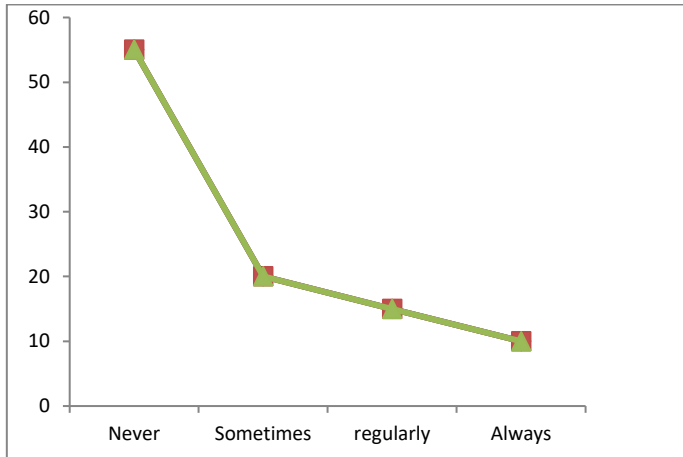


Figure 1: Frequency of participation in the ZNPG

Factors that discourage PWD from participating in the ZNPG

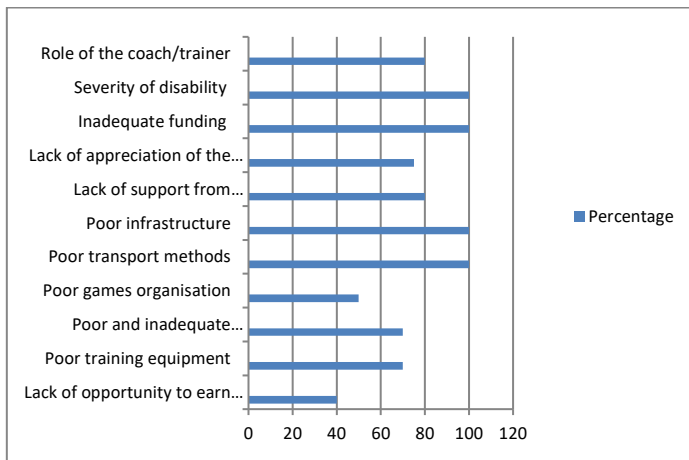


Figure 2: Barriers to participation

During the interviews the respondents were also asked to explain briefly some of the main factors highlighted above. The following are some of the selected explanations from the respondents.

In their explanations one of the respondents lamented thus:

“There is general lack of appreciation on the importance of sport among disabled people and we also lack support from those close to us, most people close to us think that we are not capable of playing sport. Sometimes it is very difficult to get people who can accompany you and it is very difficult for some of us to physically get into public transport without assistance which makes you an object of pity”.

Another respondent indicated that:

“As disabled people we need financial incentives to participate more, and we do not have adequate assistive devices and suitable sports

equipment, in addition the grounds are poor and not user friendly for disabled people at all as they were never made with us in mind”.

In addition, another respondent had this to say:

“The organization of the is usually poor and the games are organised mostly by able bodied people who do not appreciate fully our needs and challenges, nothing for us, without us does not work at all. We are usually poorly accommodated, poorly fed, poorly kitted and poorly transported during these games which generally discourage us from taking part.”

It can be deduced from the findings that inadequate funding was one of the major overarching barriers since funding affected many aspects related to the participation or PWD in the ZNPG. These include facilities, transport equipment organization and many others.

From the above listed barriers all surveyed 100% of the respondents highlighted poor infrastructure as a barrier impeding participation. This barrier was pursued this further to try and unpack it into its constituent components and the responses resulted in the identification of the following list of infrastructural barriers.

- Unsuitable competition and training grounds
- Inaccessible toilets
- Unsuitable bathing facilities and
- Uncomfortable accommodation facilities

Since the infrastructural barriers were all observable the above list was then used as a checklist for the observations which followed in order to triangulate the responses of the PWD and actual observations on the ground. The results of the observations are presented below.

OBSERVATION RESULTS

After conducting the interviews, the researcher proceeded to observe the observable physical infrastructure which was used during sport by PWDs and highlighted as barriers to effective participation. This was done in order to triangulate the PWDs’ responses with actual observations of significance to the researcher were the training and competition grounds, toilets, bathing and accommodation facilities used during camping or when hosting other athletes during competitions such as the ZNPGs.

Competition and training facilities

It was observed that there were five training and competition football pitches. However, three of the pitches were more than two kilometers from the camping venue, meaning that athletes had to be transported to the grounds during competitions. The football training and competition facilities were not disability friendly. Some sections of the grounds were sandy and rocky. Both the football pitches and athletics tracks available were sandy and rocky in some sections. Sand would impact negatively on wheel chair bound athletes, while rocks would pose a danger to both the blind and wheel chair bound athletes. The athletics tracks were designed for non-disabled athletes hence were narrow, meaning the blind could not use them effectively in races. There were no indoor facilities for disciplines such as goal ball. Basketball facilities available were pot holed and in need of resurfacing. Most of the training and competition facilities were rudimentary and substandard.

Convenience facilities (Toilets)

It was observed that in terms of availability the toilets were available and adequate. However, these toilets were clearly not user friendly for PWDs as they did not have ramps and rails. The entrances of the toilets were too narrow for wheel chair bound athletes. This would make access to these toilets by PWDs difficult. Most of the toilets had squat

holes instead of seats. This again would also make the toilets difficult to use for people with certain forms of disability. In some cases, the toilets were about five hundred meters from the playing grounds and the distance would present problems to athletes with mobility problems.

Bathing facilities

The observation revealed that appropriate bathing facilities were not available. Athletes were in most cases expected to use toilets as bathing rooms. But as alluded to earlier the toilets were not user friendly for PWDs. In some cases, there were no water sources close to the toilets which means athletes had to walk some distance to collect bathing water.

Accommodation facilities

In most cases classrooms were used for accommodation. This meant that athletes would sleep on the floor. The floors were not comfortable for most disabled athletes. The classrooms entrances were narrow thereby causing accessibility challenges for wheelchair bound athletes. Some of the classrooms did not have burglar bars, doors and window panes were broken thereby compromising the security of disabled female athletes especially at night.

DISCUSSION

Awareness of the existence of ZNPG

Thirty-three percent indicated that they were aware of the existence of ZNPG. On the other hand, sixty-seven percent indicated that they did not know anything about the ZNPG. The results of the study indicate that there is low level of awareness of the ZNPG among the disabled population. These findings are supported by Hanrahan^[10] who also confirmed that most persons with disabilities were not aware of the existence of the Paralympic Games.

Participation in the ZNPGs

Fifty five of the respondents indicated that they have never participated in the ZNPG. Twenty percent sometimes participate in the ZNPG. Fifteen percent participate regularly while only ten percent indicated that they always participate. The findings indicate that the level of participation in these game was low an observation which is also shared by Rimmer *et al.*,^[4] who found out that only less than ten percent of African -American women with physical disabilities participated in the Paralympic games. Murdoch)^[5] on the other hand cites a study conducted by Sands *et al* which concluded that seventy one percent of people with disabilities had not attended any sporting percent in the year in question as compared to forty three percent of able bodied people.

Factors that discourage PWD from participating in the ZNPG

The respondents were asked to identify some of the main issues which discourage them from participating in the ZNPG and figure 3 above highlights the main issues highlighted by the respondents in terms of the quantum of importance. Poor infrastructure, poor transport methods, severity of disability and inadequate funding emerged as the most prominent barriers with one hundred percent of the respondents citing each of the barriers. Lack of support from significant others and the role of the sports trainer were also cited as major barriers by eight percent of the respondents followed by lack of appreciation of the value of sport with seventy five percent respondents. Poor and inadequate assistive devices and training equipment were also highlighted as major barriers by seventy percent of the respondents. Poor organization of games was cited as a barrier by fifty percent of the respondents while lack of opportunity for earning income from participation was cited by only forty percent of the respondents.

Most of the barriers cited by the PWDs surveyed in this study and listed in the above paragraph were also cited by other researchers as factors affecting PWD in other areas. Boland^[7] identified among others lack of support from significant others, lack of acceptance of the value of sport as significant barriers. Hanranan^[10] identified lack of transport as one of the significant barriers. Participation of PWD was also affected by the level and severity of disability of the PWD. Responses from the PWD showed that participation was inversely related to the level of disability. This finding is fully supported by Boland (2005), Sherill^[7, 13]. Boland^[7] in particular asserts that those with profound and multiple disabilities tended to have the lowest levels of participation in the Paralympic competitions. The role of the trainer/coach identified as a barrier in this study was also identified by Hanrahan (2003)^[10] who stated that sports trainers for PWDs play a significant part in enhancing participation. Kristen; Patricksson & Fridlund^[11] identified that sports trainers are aware of shortcomings in their own training, leading to problems in ascertaining the individual needs of children and adolescents with physical disabilities. In addition, Okundare^[12] observed that the role of the trainers also has a significant influence on the socialisation process of the disabled individual child or adolescent, as a result of the fact that the trainer and the sport participants often develop a close and personal relation.

The observation revealed that training, competition, bathing, accommodation and convenience facilities were substandard in conformity with Hanranan^[10]'s findings that in a study conducted by a local sport partnership in Canada lack of suitable facilities were identified as one of the two major barriers to participation in addition to lack of transport which was also identified in this study and reported in figure 2 above.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study led to the following recommendations;

- Advocacy and awareness campaigns should be carried out targeting disabled and non-disabled people to increase appreciation of the benefits of sport for PWD.
- The government and relevant NGOS should increase funding for the games. Provision of adequate and quality transport, food and user friendly equipment, assistive devices, facilities and camping material during the games should be prioritized.
- Government and non-governmental organizations should mobilize more resources for the games; government agencies and disability rights advocates should intensify awareness on the rights of PWDs and importance of participation in sport by people with disabilities.
- The Sports and Recreation Commission should capacity build Teachers, Coaches, Heads of Schools, Sports Directors and other relevant structures who contribute directly or indirectly towards the participation of PWDs in the Paralympic games
- The Local Authority should construct new and modify existing structures to make them user friendly for the disabled people
- The SRC should ensure that PWDs are included in the local organizing committees of the Paralympic games in order to fulfill the aphorism, "Nothing for us without us" in order to make participation by PWDs meaningful and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the findings that just like in other parts of the world the level of participation in sport by PWD in Gokwe south district is very low. PWDs in Gokwe south district experience a host of challenges in their quest to participate in the Paralympic games. The major challenges identified were severity of disability, inadequate funding, poor transport, lack of support from significant others, lack of appreciation of the value of sport, poor and inadequate assistive devices, poor training equipment and the role of the sports trainer

were found to be the major factors limiting access to sport participation by PWDs.

Conflict of interest

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors contributions

Edmore Nhamo (Mr): Conceptualizing and designing of empirical study, data collecting and analysis, drafting of research article for publication.
Patrick Sibanda (Dr): Conceptualizing and designing of empirical study, data collecting and analysis, proof reading of research article for important intellectual content.

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