

Access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities by women with disabilities in Zimbabwe's Harare Metropolitan Province during COVID-19

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Abstract

This study was conducted in three low-income areas of Harare Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe to understand how women with disabilities accessed water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities during COVID-19. Qualitative data were collected through structured interviews and focus group discussions involving 104 purposively sampled women with disabilities. Key informant interviews were held with seven representatives of organisations working with persons with disabilities in Harare. Findings indicated that overt discrimination against women with disabilities increased as households struggled to access WASH facilities. These women risked gender harassment from community boreholes 'marshals', and urogenital infections resulting from unhygienic menstruation management practices. Poor waste disposal and water reticulation systems restricted high water, sanitation and hygiene standards required to fight the pandemic. The study recommends the full implementation of the national disability policy and the constitutional provisions to safeguard the rights of women with disabilities in times of crises.

Points of interest

Women with disabilities generally face multiple barriers to accessing water, sanitation and hygiene. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these barriers making it quite arduous for them to access water, sanitation and hygiene.

The national response to the COVID-19 pandemic was formulated without women with disabilities in mind, and therefore, their unique needs were largely ignored rendering it difficult for them to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

It is recommended that deliberate measures be created in consultation and with the full participation of women with disabilities and their organisations, to ensure inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene measures and guarantee the rights of women with disabilities.

While the National Disability Policy articulates the need to ensure that persons with disabilities have equitable access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene and that water points are accessible and closer to where persons with disabilities live, this call is not being fully implemented.

Some water points are inaccessible, the design of community boreholes is insensitive to the needs of persons with disabilities and community members do not exercise reasonable accommodation to persons with disabilities who stand in long queues for hours.

Instead of reasonable accommodation, women with disabilities were exposed to verbal abuse, harassment, requests for bribes and sometimes 'sex for water' transactions at community boreholes.

Keywords: Boreholes, COVID-19, menstruation, water, sanitation and hygiene, women with disabilities