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Between rhetoric and reality: disabled Rwandan young women's perspectives on gender inequality in school

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the limits of national discussions on gender equality in Rwanda from the perspectives of disabled young women. Based on 16 in-depth interviews and three focus group interviews with disabled Rwandan young women, this article points out that the barriers to gender equality are interpersonal and institutional. The empirical analysis reveals that gender biases at Rwanda's largest inclusive secondary school are reinforced by wider cultural and religious norms, which endorse the subordination of disabled girls and young women in school. The study suggests that the equality rhetoric/reality gap will remain in Rwandan schools and society if the wider cultural and religious institutions are not examined and transformed.

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Gender equality; girls' education; disability rights; inclusive education

Points of interest

- This article examines gender inequality in school from the perspectives of disabled young women in Rwanda.
- Critical explorations of the differences between disabled young women's and young men's educational experiences have yet to be addressed in educational policies in Rwanda.
- The findings reveal that gender inequality in schools is reinforced by patterns of male domination in churches and families throughout Rwandan society.
- This study is the first to explore the complex gender dynamics among disabled youth in Rwanda.

Introduction

In recent years, Rwanda has garnered much-deserved recognition for its progressive policies and programmes promoting gender equality (Berry 2015;

Russell 2015). In the 2016 *Global Gender Gap Report*, for instance, Rwanda ranked fifth among 145 nation-states across the globe – ahead of all other African, North American, Caribbean and Asian countries – because of its comparably high rates of female participation and success in various sectors of society (World Economic Forum 2016). As a result of its 2008 parliamentary elections, Rwanda became the first nation in the world to have more than 50% of its parliamentary seats held by women (Wallace, Haerpfer, and Abbott 2008). Five years later, Rwanda improved on its results, moving from 56% of women parliamentarians to 64%, a very significant increase since 1994 when women held only 17% of parliamentary posts (Carlson and Randell 2013). It is not surprising, then, that Rwanda has become a celebrated site for women's rights and gender equality over the past decade (Russell 2016; Wallace, Karangwa, and Bayisenge 2018).

Despite commendation from international agencies regarding Rwanda's progress towards gender equality, there remains a gap between rhetoric and reality – public praise narratives on gender parity and egalitarianism that prove more partial than comprehensive, more aspirational than realistic. The gap between rhetoric and reality in Rwanda, and indeed around the world, is often based on imbalanced attention to parity in numbers and constitutional pronouncements rather than everyday power relations between and among the sexes (Russell 2016). In this regard, the rhetoric/reality gap in Rwanda begs questions such as: do all women matter equally in Rwanda's historically male-dominated nation-building project? More specifically, how do disabled young women fare in national investments in improving women's political empowerment and girls' educational success? This article attends to these imperatives.

This article presents empirical research which suggests that despite Rwanda's progressive gender policies and programmes, patriarchy circulates through cultural and religious traditions to preserve rigid gender scripts about 'authentic' African manhood that presupposes masculine dominance and 'good' womanhood based on deference to male authority. The research explores how such experiences of masculine domination are understood from the perspectives of disabled young women at Rwanda's largest inclusive secondary school. In this article, masculine domination is understood in Bourdieusian terms as widespread (un)conscious biases and symbolic violence that reinforce male superiority and female inferiority as natural and normative. Masculine domination informs everyday social relations, shapes social institutions like schools, families and churches, and influences the identity development of girls and boys in Rwanda and around the world (Bourdieu 1990, Wallace 2017, 2018). The heterogeneous expressions of masculine domination described by participants underscore the need for a more radical change in Rwanda's relational and religio-cultural structures in order

to ensure the empowerment of all young women, most urgently economically disadvantaged disabled young women throughout Rwandan schools and society.

In what follows, we first offer critical perspectives on gender and disability in Rwanda, after which we provide an overview of the disability studies literature in Rwanda, highlighting the paucity of scholarship attentive to disabled girls and young women. Second, we explore Black feminist perspectives on intersectionality to develop a layered theoretical framework for understanding the complex experiences of disabled young women. Third, drawing on empirical data, we highlight how disabled Rwandan young women identify and, in some instances, interrupt masculine domination. In all sections, the term 'disabled' is used strategically. Although a historically contested term, the term 'disabled' in the contemporary moment underscores the social construction of impairments as disabilities – and serves as a designation that resists the essentialist bio-logic of the medical model that locates disability primarily as the outcome of particular bodies and ways of being, and not of society and its attendant social conditions (Lalvani 2013; Siebers 2008; Shakespeare 2006).

Contextual data on gender and disability in Rwanda

Rwanda is a small, landlocked and densely populated country situated in Central Africa with a surface area of 26,338 km² and a population of 10,515,973 residents, of which 52% are women. The Rwandan population is projected to increase from 10.5 million in 2012 to as high as 16.9 million by 2032 (NISR 2014a). Overall, 446,453 disabled persons aged five and above are living in Rwanda, out of which 221,150 are male and 225,303 are female (Ministry of Education 2015). When excluding children under five years old, the disability prevalence rate is 5%. There are only minor differences by gender, with a prevalence rate of 5.2% for males (aged five and above) and 4.8% for females (NISR 2014b).

Approximately 64% of disabled children are currently attending school in Rwanda, while 81% of non-disabled children are enrolled in the nation's private and public schools (Ministry of Education 2015). Although a sizable share of disabled children is in school, 2010 Census data show that some of them face difficulties accessing education. The census findings suggest that 27% of disabled children have never attended school, compared to 14% of non-disabled children. Moreover, 9% of disabled children have left school permanently compared to 6% of their non-disabled peers (NISR 2014b). Most disabled persons who have attended school stopped at the primary level (Ministry of Education 2015). Those who have a secondary level of education represent approximately 6% of disabled youth, with the percentage being

slightly higher for disabled males (8%) than disabled females (5%) (NISR 2014b). Forty-one per cent of Rwanda's disabled population and 50% of disabled women have no formal education. The situation seems better in urban areas, where only 27% of disabled persons are uneducated and 18% attain secondary education (NISR 2014b).

When considering the causes of disability, almost half of all disabled persons aged five and above declare that their disability is due to an illness or disease (NISR 2014b). Injuries and accidents rank second, with one in five disabled persons declaring this to be the cause. In addition, 13% have a congenital condition and 8% of disabled persons report war and the genocide against the Tutsi and politically moderate Hutus as the cause of their disabilities (NISR 2014b). The 1994 genocide contributed to the number of disabled people in Rwanda, thousands of whom were either hacked by machetes, injured by bombs, shot during local conflicts or became ill during relocation to refugee camps in Rwanda and across East Africa due to poor sanitation and malnutrition (MINALOC and ADPD/RNDSC 2010).

While quantitative data suggest that disabled females fare less well than disabled males in terms of educational access, participation and completion in Rwanda, an analysis of central and cognate sources reveals that there is a dearth of critical discussions of disabled girls' and young women's educational experiences in research and national educational policy discourses in Rwanda. In what follows, we spotlight the limited exploration of Rwandan disabled young women in disability studies scholarship in order to underscore why the analyses advanced in this article are salient and urgent.

National perspectives on disabled youth

Over the last two decades, a new wave of scholarship has sought to highlight the strained educational experiences of disabled youth in Rwandan schools, pointing out the impact of inconsistent schooling, social isolation and bullying, and ineffective pedagogy on their trajectories (Wallace, Karangwa, and Bayisenge 2018). These new works highlight at least three core themes: the relationship between disability and limited educational opportunity (Karangwa, Ghesquiere, and Devlieger 2007); the wide-ranging cultural prejudices and superstitions that shape social attitudes towards disabled people (Karangwa 2013; Meekosha 2008); and the institutional shortcomings in Rwanda's education sector devoted to the improvement and empowerment of disabled youth (National Union of Disability Organizations in Rwanda (NUDOR) 2014; Thomas 2005).

Inclusive education in the Rwandan context is understood broadly, due in part to the nation's economic and infrastructural limitations. Karangwa (2013, 52) suggests that definitions range between "mixed education" (*uburezi*

mvange), “education that suits all” (uburezi mberabose), “non-exclusionary education” (uburezi budaheza), and “nonsegregated education” (uburezi ntavangura)’. Contemporary definitions of inclusive education in Rwanda from a government standpoint are informed by the internationally recognized A-4 Framework (availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability) (Ramaahlo, Tonsing, and Bornman 2018). However, the history of inclusive education in Rwanda is one of evolving definitions that over time prioritize the social model over the medical model. Such a history is also marked by increasing (inter)national support for disabled people in policy and practice.

In his review of the historical development of inclusive education in Rwanda from the 1960s to the present, Karangwa (2013) maintains that there are three distinct periods of inclusive education history. The first is the post-colonial period (1960–1990), in which charities and religious organizations provided ad-hoc special education and rehabilitation services to a minor subset of disabled young people, often with very little government support. During the second juncture, the genocide and reconciliation period (1990–2000), there was a relatively modest increase in the range of support provided to disabled young people. While the health and education sectors of the government officially began providing moral and material support for the education of disabled youth during this period, much of the teaching and support services were led by international and religious charities. In the post-genocide reconstruction period (2000–present), the government of Rwanda has formulated policies to enhance the rights of disabled people, trained teachers and community leaders on effective, age-appropriate, culturally responsive pedagogies and streamlined collaboration among grassroots non-governmental organizations and international bodies to fulfil the mandate made clear in Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities along with related international policy frameworks (Lalvani 2013; Oliver 2013). Despite all these efforts to advance inclusive education in Rwanda based on the internationally recognized A-4 Framework (availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability) (Ramaahlo, Tonsing, and Bornman 2018), a striking opportunity gap remains among Rwandan young people. The Ministry of Education’s 2013 Strategic Plan points out that disabled seven to eight year olds are three times less likely to have started kindergarten by age six, are 18% more likely to repeat a primary school grade than their non-disabled peers and are four times more likely to drop out of school than their non-disabled peers. What remains unexplored in qualitative research is the extent to which the prevailing opportunity gap is gendered among disabled Rwandan young people.

Karangwa, Ghesquiere, and Devlieger (2007), among others, outline the attitudinal and infrastructural barriers that impede the educational advancement of disabled youth. Based on social myths about disabled people as bad

omens, widespread verbal abuse and bullying, along with patronizing attitudes of pity and shame, perceptions of disabled youth at the family level, community level and school level remain prejudicial. Commenting on the treatment of disabled children in schools and ongoing organizations, Thomas (2005, 3) points out that 'Rwandans do not value disabled children ... [They] are seen as a source of shame and often hidden away. Name-calling is common.' In addition to negative perceptions of disabled youth in school and society, education for this minoritized group is also shaped by poor and limited infrastructure. Karangwa, Ghesquiere, and Devlieger maintain that:

Of uppermost concern were the considerable infrastructural barriers to the achievement of quality for all Rwandan children. Inadequate water and sanitation in many primary schools and class sizes of over 56 students mean that schools are poorly equipped to provide an inclusive education of quality in safe, child-friendly conditions. (2007, 275)

But support is not limited only by the physical infrastructure. It has been documented that limited specialized teacher-training for pre-service teachers, inaccessible school infrastructures, particularly in remote, rural regions, and community stigmatization of disabled youth has often resulted in inhospitable learning environments, causing delays in the initiation and completion of their primary and secondary education (Balsera 2011; Finnoff 2015). This is partly why disabled pupils (including participants in this study) are often older than their non-disabled peers in secondary school.

Although the field of disability studies in Rwanda is still in its early phases, and offers considerable insights into the plight of disabled youth, it bears some shortcomings worth spotlighting, so as to enable its future growth and development. The future of disability studies research in Rwanda necessitates a sharp focus on gender, or more precisely, women and gendered power relations. Until recently, statistical data and qualitative scholarship on disabled youth were largely undifferentiated by gender, which inadvertently suggests that the vulnerability and agency of disabled girls and boys are perhaps synonymous or unremarkable (Wallace, Karangwa, and Bayisenge 2018). Furthermore, research has yet to focus closely on gender dynamics among disabled people in Rwanda. By focusing explicitly here on the educational experiences of economically disadvantaged disabled young women in a school that describes itself as inclusive, this article extends disability studies scholarship (and gender studies research) in Rwanda.

Beyond Rwanda: perspectives from the Global South

The noted gaps in disability studies scholarship cannot be solely relegated to Rwanda (Meekosha 2008; Unterhalter and North 2011). Throughout various

parts of the Global South, research and advocacy in the field of disability studies typically prioritizes inter-group relations (differences between disabled versus non-disabled people and structures) as opposed to intra-group relations (differences among disabled people based on gender, class and other indices of difference) (Nguyen et al. 2015; Swartz and Marchetti-Mercer 2018). This ultimately precludes fine-grained analyses of relationships among disabled girls and boys, for example. Additionally, educational research on girls in the Global South is still largely oriented around the interests and concerns of able-bodied females (Fennell and Arnot 2008; World Health Organization 2011). When the experiences of disabled girls and young women are explored in places as diverse as Nigeria, Vietnam and Iran, they are often based largely on the presumed vulnerability (seldom the agency) of disabled girls (Don, Salami, and Ghajarieh 2015; Eleweke 2013; Nguyen et al. 2015).

The limitations of the literature noted can be more effectively understood within the wider global policy-scape informing the educational experiences of disabled girls and young women in the Global South (Ball 2010; UNESCO 2009; Vavrus 2003). With the passing of human rights accords and development charters such as the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals, and Education for All Frameworks, gender equality and disability rights are diffused through global agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNESCO, USAID and UNICEF, among others (Meekosha 2008; Swartz and Marchetti-Mercer 2018; World Health Organization 2011). To this end, the impetus for women's rights and disability rights is not always a bottom-up demand attentive to the most marginalized, but a top-down incentive for improving international relations and increasing donor aid. Russell (2016), Ramaahlo, Tonsing, and Bornman (2018), Nguyen et al. (2015), Don, Salami, and Ghajarieh (2015), Vavrus (2003), and Milligan (2014), among others, note how in Rwanda, Tanzania, India, Kenya, Vietnam, Iran and other parts of the Global South, gender equality and disability rights at times become strategies for 'doing' economic development from 'outside in', rather than transforming the social and cultural structures of society from the 'inside out'. Without high-level national and international policy demands and incentives centred squarely on women's disability rights, the complex experiences of disabled women and girls perhaps will not filter into targeted approaches by local governments to ensure the educational empowerment of disabled women in Rwanda and across the Global South.

Towards critical feminist disability studies in Rwanda

There is an urgent need to extend the field of disability studies in Rwanda from critical feminist perspectives. Critical feminist analytics prioritize

women's subjectivities and interrogate the nature of unequal power relations that inform social inequality. According to Knoll (2012, 16), 'feminist disability studies emerged out of the necessity to find a space that does not wash away or diminish our experiences as people with disabilities [...], and as gendered persons with a multitude of intersecting identities'. Accordingly, we draw here on intersectionality to elucidate the complex dynamics that undermine gender equality efforts beyond policy and media pronouncements and promote patriarchy as a religious tradition and cultural ideal. Attention to masculine domination, and its sundry manifestations – from critical feminist perspectives – is therefore warranted if we are to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality, and ultimately ensure women's disability rights in education.

Critical feminist points of view, as outlined through intersectionality, afford us insights into how gender oppression compounds (and is compounded by) social class and disability (Knoll 2012). Coined by Black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw as an analytical strategy for identifying the marginalization of Black women in the law, intersectionality identifies the consistently complex relationship between race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion, age and other indices of social difference not fully explored as 'reciprocally constructing phenomena' (Collins 2015, 3.1) in traditional anti-racist, feminist and disability studies scholarship (Crenshaw 1993). More specifically, intersectionality calls attention to the limitations of single-axis analyses that consider race or gender or disability – as if these are ever strictly autonomous categories. As conceived by Crenshaw (1991) and extended by Collins (2000), intersectionality spotlights hidden, interrelated oppressions that reproduce inequality and perpetuates the misrecognition of multiply marginalized groups (Bilge 2013).

Crenshaw (1991), Collins (2000) and their contemporaries deploy intersectionality not simply to account for multiple complex identities but to identify the nature of power in social life. They suggest that intersectionality is premised on at least three core principles: emphasis on lived experiences and intricate identities that 'indivisibly intermingle' (MacKinnon 2013, 1020); focus on systems of domination such as patriarchy and ableism – 'targeting the forces that create the outcomes, not just their static products' (MacKinnon 2013, 1023); and critique of social institutions – sites in which power hierarchies are reified and reproduced. To this end, intersectionality is not solely or even primarily about identity work; it is also about structural critique and institutional analysis. The effective use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework calls for an examination of social identities, structural inequalities and the relationship between the two. In the empirical sections that follow, participants seek not only recognition of their complex identities (shaped by gender, disability and class) but also the improvement of power relations in

Table 1. Description of participants.

Participant	Profile
Alice	Hailing from the southern province of Rwanda, 26-year-old Alice started school when she was only four years of age due to the school's distance from her home. After dropping out of school at age eight for three years due to an infection that impaired her legs, Alice returned to school and moved on to Busengare secondary. Now a sit-ball star in the 12th grade, Alice plans to become a physical therapist
Josephine	24-year-old Josephine lost sight in her left eye during her childhood, and now uses her limited vision to assist others. A native of Rwanda's southern province, the 11th-grader grew up cultivating crops with her mother and siblings. Following her studies at Busengare, she hopes to pursue a career in teaching
Joy	Joy is a 22-year-old 10th-grader. Although meningitis and polio limited her movement, Joy continued her primary schooling, cultivated an interest in languages and volunteered consistently in her church community. Joy aspires to become a teacher in the near future
Rene	11th-grader Rene was born with smaller than usual hands and limited fine motor skills. Although teased severely as a child, Rene developed a steely resolve to advocate for disabled people. With a commitment to pursuing a career in science, technology and comedy, 18-year-old Rene is invested in tertiary studies at the National University of Rwanda in the coming years
Jeanette	23-year-old Jeanette lost both her legs as a child in an accident that claimed the life of her two playmates. Without a wheelchair, Jeanette struggled to continue her schooling. Now in the 11th grade, Jeanette intends to pursue a bachelor's degree in information management systems and eventually return to her community to make it a more accessible place
Esther	Due to polio and related complications, Esther's leg muscles began to atrophy, severely limiting her mobility by age seven. After completing her formal studies in the natural sciences and laboratory technology, 23-year-old Esther wishes to pursue higher education to become a physical therapist
Peace	25-year-old student-leader Peace lost the ability to walk at the age of seven due to reasons still unknown to her. When doctors in Kigali could not ascertain the specific medical cause for Peace's impairment, she became associated with misfortune and witchcraft. With a passion for blending western and traditional medicine, Peace intends to attend the university to ultimately become a science researcher
Ruth	Born with a small and shortened left arm along with limited vision in her right eye, 20-year-old Ruth started primary school at the age of eight. Ruth finished earlier than expected and eventually enrolled in Busengare school for advanced studies. The 11th-grader wishes to attend university in Uganda to pursue studies in architecture

schools and related institutions that reinforce masculine domination and limit gender equality.

Research methods

Data used in this article are drawn from a larger multi-method qualitative study, which included participant observation of 10 classes (with a total of 120 sessions), 28 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with disabled Rwandan young women and men, five focus group interviews and 18 in-depth interviews with teachers and community stakeholders about the educational experiences of disabled young people at a secondary school we call Busengare (Wallace, Karangwa, and Bayisenge 2018). This article focuses on disabled young women based on 16 in-depth interviews and three focus group interviews based on a purposive sample of eight Rwandan young

women with varying physical impairments conducted in 2010. For biographical information on the participants, see [Table 1](#).

The eight participants highlighted in this article are young women, aged 18–26, attending Busengare secondary school, Rwanda's first and most famous inclusive school. For much of its development, Busengare was financed and staffed exclusively by the Catholic Church, while the government monitored its activities (Rubagiza, Were, and Sutherland 2011). Unfortunately, the 1994 genocide interrupted the school's progress (along with the education of thousands of disabled young people, causing some participants and their non-disabled peers to be of adult age but still in secondary school). With several teachers murdered in their homes and communities, school activities were suspended for two years. In 1996, inclusive education for disabled and non-disabled students became an educational strategy at Busengare school. Based on a generous grant from the Brothers of Charity, a Catholic outreach service, the school moved to its current 15-block premises with residential accommodation and recreational facilities. With its 500 students and 30 teachers and staff, Busengare is well known not only because of its pupils, but because of its programmes. Its laboratory technology programme is a rare one in Rwanda. As such, science-focused pupils are perhaps just as intrigued by the school as disabled students interested in the arts. More than any other school in Rwanda, Busengare strives to adhere to the human rights A-4 Framework, making high-quality education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for all students, especially disabled students. It is because of its unique position in Rwanda's education system that Busengare is an ideal unique institution worth assessing as a case study.

Participants for the study were recruited in two phases. First, school leaders and the lead author made an open call to Year 9, 10 and 11 disabled students, which yielded a significant number of interested informants. To narrow the pool of prospective participants, we focused on students whose parents or guardians have been unemployed for five years or more, students who spoke English or French in addition to Kinyarwanda and students who received principal and parental/guardian consent to engage in the project. Following the first three interviews, we utilized a snowball sampling approach to widen the pool of participants; this constitutes the second phase of the recruitment process. The eight female participants in this study were interviewed twice. After the 16 one-on-one interviews, these participants agreed to engage in three focus group interviews. The lead author conducted all interviews with the support of two trained research assistants (one male and one female), each with over 10 years' experience of working with disabled people throughout Rwanda. Interviews lasted between 70 and 90 minutes each. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity and security of participants. To ensure the highest level of ethics, the

research team underwent training on interviewing and maintaining relationships with participants. Each interview was conducted by at least two members of the research team versed in French, English and Kinyarwanda to ensure that participants were optimally understood. Additionally, the research team received ethical clearance and support from Rwanda's Ministry of Education at the national and district levels.

All one-on-one and focus group interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed using NVivo to enhance the reliability of the coding process. The data analysis was guided by a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). There were two interrelated phases of the analysis process: open coding with broad descriptive categories such as 'gender relations among disabled boys and girls' and 'female-led peer advocacy', amongst others; and focused coding with categories such as 'girls with perspectives on male dominance' and 'teachers' gender expectations in class', all of which added richness and depth to the analysis. With open and focused coding as core features of the analytic process, complex perspectives on disabled Rwandan young women's understandings of gendered ableism emerged.

Findings

This section explores two core findings. First, the participants in this study perceive power dynamics in the classroom as ones predicated on rigid gender expectations of disabled young women and men. Second, the subtle but searing forms of sexism disabled young women in this study encounter are enabled by wider cultural and religious institutions which inadvertently suggest that the subordination of women to men is authentic, normative, moral and even 'divine'. The remainder of this article explicates in greater detail the core findings noted.

The hidden costs of gender inequality

A legally progressive society that is still largely patriarchal subjects disabled young women to the notion that their value is contingent on culturally acceptable performances of female identity – speaking softly, behaving shyly and deferring to men frequently. In mixed-gender gatherings, disabled young women were discouraged from pursuing leadership roles (of thought or action) in classrooms, and encouraged instead to play 'soft' complementary roles to their male counterparts. Peace explains:

... It is a difficult thing ... being a disabled girl and a leader ... In the disabled community, if you're a strong leader who speaks up and challenges people, then a lot of the boys think you are not a traditional girl, or a good girl. Sometimes, you have to choose between being a good girl or being a strong leader ... and if you

are a strong leader as a disabled girl in this school, at some point, you know that to be accepted by other students and not get isolated, I think you have to show that you can be a good girl ... what are you supposed to be? Who? The girl you are and be by yourself or be the girl people require you to be and find a good community?

Alice's comments underscore similar identity constraints. She asserts:

... When you are disabled, people don't think you can lead regular people ... and if you are a leader then you are a boy ... It's like people think a disabled boy makes you less disabled than a disabled girl ... (Alice)

Alice and Peace voice the complex relational dynamics of gender inequality that disabled young women negotiate in everyday life but are difficult to address in current educational policies focused broadly on non-disabled young women's empowerment. Equalizing access to schooling and increasing the enrolment of disabled and non-disabled young women does not displace traditions of gender relations that render female identities demoted resources for the elevation of men. Alice and Peace's commentary is emblematic of wider logics on femininity that authenticate 'good girlhood/womanhood' through performances of female identity that complement, and do not contradict, traditional understandings of manhood. Disabled young women like Peace are compelled to choose from a narrow range of gender scripts to illustrate not what kind of young women they are, but what kind of disabled young woman is most acceptable and valuable in school. Peace and Alice's sentiments are shared by all of the disabled young women in this study. The following focus group extract provides additional insights into the attendant pressures that to varying degrees limit the full and free expression of disabled young women's leadership and intellectual engagement in schools:

Joy: Disabled boys don't have to make a choice between being a boy and being strong in the classroom. I think they grow up thinking being a boy and being strong are the same thing, even when you are disabled ... Here in Rwanda, we girls know we can do a lot things, but there is a price to pay. You have to be a good girl.

Interviewer: So, what do you mean by a good girl?

Peace: ... you have to listen to the man or the boy. You respect them ... You have to act nice, smile, pretend like you are shy ... it is stupid.

Interviewer: All of you think that?

Ruth: Well look, not really. We all might feel pressure to be good girls, but I don't care if they think I am good or not. I am trying to make sure I am a smart leader, a strong leader, so that I can get a job and take care of my family. If my family doesn't like it, then, they will eventually when I start taking care of them.

Peace: Yeah, but if a man is around, you have to act as though you are not the main leader.

Joy: Right, you have to act like you are working with him to make it happen.

Ruth: That is you. If I am the leader, then I am the leader.

Joy: Ah, well, you're not a good girl. [Girls laugh loudly.]

Even within the confines of an 'inclusive secondary school' with a wide range of disabled and non-disabled students, young women like Ruth, Joy and Peace understand their schooling as a distinctly gendered experience. They are acutely aware of the gendered hierarchies and biases that inform their schooling – ones that advantage their male counterparts throughout the life course. The peculiar gendered experiences of schooling are relevant not only to the participants in this study, but also to a wide swath of disabled and non-disabled young people in Rwandan society. This is because the disjuncture between progressive girls' educational policies (rhetoric) and girls' persistent experiences of disadvantage in school (reality) is increasingly apparent at the local level (Berry 2015). Analysing Rwanda within the wider context of global gender discourse, Russell (2016) notes gender equality as a political project often motivated by international relations and donor aid for economic development (Straus and Waldorf 2011). However, Russell (2016) contends that, at local levels, the experiences of girls and young women in Rwanda are at points inconsistent with the national and international rhetoric around gender equality. Such experiences are even more complicated for the Rwandan girls and young women whose identities are simultaneously shaped by disability and economic disadvantage.

In a society that readily labels disabled young people as 'broken' or 'haunted', especially in remote rural regions (Karangwa, Ghesquiere, and Devlieger 2007), some disabled young women may concede to gender stereotypes in order to offset widespread, negative views of their disability, rendering them 'normal' through their gender performance despite their perceived physical and economic limitations. For Jeanette, the trade off is difficult to fathom if not living at the intersection of national identity, gender, class and disability. She reports:

... When I first started here ... I noticed that they would praise the other girls who are quiet and calm the way they think girls should be ... I didn't want to be left out ... I'm supposed to be at home here ... So, after a while, I learned my place and what I should do as a disabled girl around disabled men ... Now, I talk to the teacher one-on-one. If I need help, I ask one of the boys. Or if I know the answer, I tell the girls, but not the boys ... Unless you are Rwandese, a girl, disabled and coming from a poor family, you won't really understand the choices I have to make. (Jeanette)

For Jeanette, subscribing to dominant social scripts of 'ideal' girlhood is a constrained choice, a bind formulated at the nexus of her gender, disability and social class. Yet it is a gendered constraint that perhaps frees participants like her to enhance their social status and protect their reputations through conformity. Still others, like Ruth, who wish to defy rigid gender scripts, run the risk of being stigmatized or ostracized in peer networks – losing their reputation as 'good girls'. Nevertheless, other participants persist, for they negotiate their identities differently; they do not wish to compromise their public leadership for peer approval. Ruth asserts:

... I am a disabled, Catholic girl from a poor family and I am a leader in the classroom. I am smart. I can't compromise my identity or my future to please boys. I have lost enough in the past as a disabled girl ... I can't lose myself too ...

Although participants respond differently to the gendered forms of domination they encounter in classrooms at Busengare, Jeanette and Ruth both underscore the importance of their intersectional identities of gender, age, class, disability, religion and national identity. At this juncture in Rwandan society, the acknowledgement of such complex identities and the distinct experiences they yield in schools are altogether missing in social and educational policies. This influences the identity development and gender performances of disabled girls, constraining some to internalize the expectations of disabled boys for relational rewards in peer networks, and pushing others to reject such limitations to pursue their own aspirations and potentially suffer isolation. Educational policies must acknowledge and counter the multiple forms of domination all girls encounter if women's empowerment is to be more substantive in Rwandan society. Infusing a group-centred approach to intersectionality in educational policies, which 'plac[es] multiply-marginalized groups and their perspectives at the center of the research' as a practice of inclusion, would encourage the consistent prioritization of multiply minoritized groups such as economically disadvantaged disabled young women (Choo and Ferree 2010, 129). This group-centred approach is significant, not only because it pushes beyond measures of rhetorical support for minority groups, but because the protection of the most disadvantaged ensures the liberty of all groups in Rwandan society.

Language, morality and disability

Although participants disagree about their responses to masculine domination in the classroom, they all confirm that influential institutions such as churches and families play significant roles in justifying the subjugated status positions of disabled young women. The linguistic and cultural traditions governing communities and families, along with the doctrines taught in local churches, often contradict women's empowerment policies in a national

Table 2. Descriptive terms in Kinyarwanda for disabled youth.

Descriptive identity	Use	Literal meaning	Circumstances in which it is used
<i>Umwana umugayee</i>	Formal	Disabled child (human)	For any disability
<i>Umwana uremaye</i>	Formal	Child with disability (human)	For physical disabilities
<i>Ikimuga</i>	Casual	Dysfunctional (object)	For any disability or impairment
<i>Ikirema</i>	Casual	Deformed (object)	For mainly physical disabilities
<i>Ikiragi</i>	Casual	Speechless (object)	For anyone who cannot hear
<i>Igicumba</i>	Casual	Limping one (object)	Referring to locomotion difficulties
<i>Ibifamatwi</i>	Casual	Dead eared (object)	For anyone who cannot hear
<i>Impunyi</i>	Casual	Senseless (sightless thing)	For anyone who cannot see
<i>Umunyagicuri</i>	Casual	Upside-down (human)	For an epileptic person
<i>Umurwayi</i>	Casual	Sickly (human)	For mental deficiencies
<i>Umusazi</i>	Casual	Mad (human)	For a schizophrenic person
<i>Ikigoryi</i>	Casual	Stupid (object)	For mental deficiencies
<i>Igicucu</i>	Casual	Shadow (object)	For low achievers
<i>Ntakigenda</i>	Casual	No movements	Referring to any deformities
<i>Bene abo</i>	Casual	That type of individual (human)	For anyone with disabilities
<i>Ubwenge bwaragiye</i>	Casual	The knowledge is gone	For anyone with mental deficiency
<i>Kajolite</i>	Casual	Casualty	For anyone with deformities
<i>Yatewe n' abazimu</i>	Casual	Haunted by ancestral spirits	For anyone with mental problems
<i>Yatewe n' abadayimoni</i>	Casual	Haunted by demons	For anyone with mental problems
<i>Ishyano</i>	Casual	Extraordinary mishap	For any misunderstood disability
<i>Kanyonjo</i>	Casual	Small swollen back	Referring to those with bent backs

Reproduced from Karangwa (2013) (Evariste Karangwa, the third author on this paper and lead editor of the Rwandan Journal of Education, has granted permission for the table to be reproduced).

context, inadvertently suggesting that the subordinate role of disabled women is culturally authentic and divinely ordained. In this section, we first explore the influence of language and then religion in strengthening masculine domination. Participants suggest that, to date, the words used in Kinyarwanda to describe disabled people in Rwanda are often a series of harsh invectives. Table 2 notes terms frequently used in families and communities to describe disabled people.

The aforementioned descriptors for disabled girls (and boys) in Rwanda continue to be used in formal and informal settings, particularly in rural regions where the participants are from – largely because it is ‘tradition’. The Kinyarwanda prefixes ‘Ik’, ‘Ig’, ‘Ak’ and ‘Ib’ often used to describe disabled people also imply non-sexual objects, as opposed to ‘Um’ and ‘Ab’ prefixes used to describe humans. This sense of ‘tradition’ encoded in language constrains the agency of relatives and community members, even when confronted with strong critiques of how such language reinforces inequitable power relations and increases the stigmatization of disabled young women. For example, Joy argues:

I don't like the words people in my community and sometimes in my family say towards me. Any time I hear 'iki', I stop them immediately. I say, 'I am not a thing ... I am a human. I have rights'. Sometimes they listen, and some times they say 'Oh, I didn't mean to bother you. It's just how I was raised. That's our history.' This just makes me so frustrated. You know it's not right but you do it because it's tradition?

With similar sentiments about ‘tradition’ and history as guiding forces for contemporary speech, Rene points out that disabled young women are not passive spectators to injustice and neither do they easily heed to such name-calling as a strict determinist doctrine in their families and communities that cannot change. She contends:

I know what life used to be like before the genocide ... Depending on your disability, you were not even a human. Things have changed ... I know I have rights, but it’s hard to use rights in your family when you are young, when you a girl, and when you are disabled ... It’s hard to tell the elders what the past was like and how they should behave. But, I speak up for myself ... I know now that speaking up when people call you a ‘thing’ doesn’t mean they will listen and change ... If they change their words for me, it doesn’t mean they will change them for all ... but I have to keep trying ...

In these and related instances, participants resist an unquestioning obedience to tradition that limit their policy-promised futures. Both Joy and Rene acknowledge their rights as disabled young women to an expansive future in post-genocide Rwanda. However, they have discovered that cultural traditions rooted in an amorphous understanding of the past function as unregulated regulators in their lives. Such ‘traditions’ are ones participants struggle to refute in patrilineal familial and community contexts that reinforce the importance of male seniority and superiority. Despite the challenges, participants like Joy, Rene and their peers draw on their complex identities as young, economically disadvantaged disabled young women, and an awareness of their rights as fully-fledged citizens in post-genocide Rwanda, as motivation to question the pronounced tendency to use language that undermines their humanity in the name of tradition.

But ableist vocabulary is not the only feature of ‘tradition’ that participants negotiate. They suggest that they are occasionally subjected to prejudice based on doctrines taught in Catholic and Pentecostal churches. Participants contend that religious beliefs are often the root cause of discrimination in families and communities. Christian doctrine serves as a large but hidden policy frame, often overriding government mandates and international policy prescriptions. Although they may draw on different examples to justify their claims, all eight participants attested to the power of Christianity in shaping the perceptions and participation of disabled young women. The following extract offers insights into the effects of such doctrines on disability in participants’ schooling experiences:

Esther: A lot of [the] beliefs people in my family and community have about disabled girls come from church and come into school[s].

Interviewer: Give me an example of the beliefs you are talking about.

Alice: Think about it. A lot of examples in the Bible are of people with disabilities who are sinful, or, or have some kind of curse or spell on them.

Jeanette: When preachers and leaders talk about disability in church, they say that God loves us, and I know a lot of people show love to us, but sometimes it's really pity ... and I think it's because people think we are broken in some way ... we are not perfectly human ... and it's the same perspective you can find in school sometimes.

Esther: I agree ... like we'll become better women if we are no longer disabled, or not this disabled ... In church, I am asked sometimes to pray for my healing. I had polio and that affected my legs ... Why would I need healing now unless people still think I am sick? So people carry those ideas they learn in church outside in the community, our school and even in our homes.

Interviewer: Do you think it's because they want you to walk again?

Esther: Yes, I see that, but this idea that I am not whole because I don't walk is dangerous.

Jeanette: I lost both my legs and I am asked to pray for healing too. What can I do or God do to grow my legs again? ... I think I have to realize that there is value ... in who I am with or without legs ... I sit at the door and welcome people, that's all I do. I have never been asked to sing, lead worship or facilitate the service. I know I am part of the church, but sometimes, even when I am inside of it, I feel like I am outside ... I feel the same way at school sometimes.

The comments voiced by participants underscore three core points. Firstly, Christian doctrine serves as a meta-narrative and an informal curriculum that is arguably even more influential than current educational policy mandates which promote equality and inclusion in Rwandan schools. Put differently, the moral boundaries of religious institutions extend far beyond their premises, informing how participants understand their status and significance in schools. Secondly, the cultural and religious structures of Rwandan society contribute significantly to a sexist and gendered ableism that renders the bodies of participants dysfunctional sites repairable only through divine intervention. This bio-logic filters down to the schooling of disabled young women – compelling them to be submissive on one hand because they are young women, while being construed as 'sick', 'sinful' or 'spell-bound' because they are disabled. Thirdly, even outside of schools, disabled young women can experience limited leadership opportunities. While they can serve as members and greeters in religious institutions, participants like Jeanette suggest that there is a noticeable cap placed on their leadership capacities. From an intersectional perspective, the subtle but searing forms of sexism disabled young women in this study encounter are enabled by

wider cultural and religious institutions which inadvertently suggest that the subordination of disabled girls/young women to disabled boys/young men and non-disabled women, generally, is authentic, normative and even 'divine'.

The negative influence of religious doctrine on the lived experiences of disabled young women is, of course, not unique to Rwanda. In their analysis of the voices and views of disabled girls and young women across rural regions of Iran, for instance, Don, Salami, and Ghajarieh (2015) draw on intersectionality to highlight how conservative religious doctrines reinforced traditional cultural expectations of disabled women. Don, Salami, and Ghajarieh maintain that:

a great obstacle to the education of girls in Iran is the widespread belief among religious conservatives – the majority of whom live in rural areas – that education for women is not necessary because they will be homemakers, and will not need to earn a living outside the home. (2015, 808)

In rural Iran, the specific doctrinal interpretations may differ from rural Rwanda, but the function of religious doctrine as the basis for the subordination of disabled young women and the propagation of traditional gender mores is often consistent across a number of religious traditions and geographical boundaries.

The core findings noted in the previous extract spotlight the intricacies of the multiple forms of domination that disabled young women negotiate across a range of institutions in Rwandan society – perspectives not yet captured in educational research in Rwanda. The influence of religious doctrines in shaping gendered ableism in schools, families, churches and neighbourhoods is illustrative of Choo and Ferree's (2010, 129) rendition of a system-centred intersectionality, which 'see[s] intersectionality as shaping the entire social system [and] pushes away from associating specific inequalities with unique institutions', viewing sexism, ableism and the related forms of oppression as multi-institutional dilemmas. In this instance, complex inequalities are not simply borne out of the identities of the participants, but through their interactions across multiple, related institutions – family, church and school. In this regard, the sexism and gendered ableism participants' encounter is multiply determined. Therefore, single-issue advocacy in schools, for example, will not yield the empowerment of all girls and young women promised by Rwanda's national leaders. Analyses that focus exclusively on schools or solely on educational policies without attending to the influence of related social institutions are therefore limited in their effectiveness. To this end, the policy arena would not only benefit from perspectives on disabled young women in Rwanda, but would profit from a cross-sector, multi-institutional policy framework – especially if it is to have long-term and wide-ranging impact throughout Rwandan society.

Conclusion

Rwanda has undoubtedly made considerable strides towards gender equality over the past two decades. However, as illustrated in the foregoing pages, there remains a gap between rhetoric and reality – between policy pronouncements on gender equality and prevailing practices that foment gender inequality. Although not yet formally recognized in disability studies scholarship and educational research, disabled young women like those highlighted in this article navigate a complex system of domination based on the structural maintenance of sexism, classism and ableism in a range of institutions (schools, churches and families, among others). Even in Rwanda's largest inclusive secondary schools, gender biases impede the advancement of disabled young women, limiting them to 'soft', complementary roles in classes that perpetuate masculine domination. Masculine domination is fortified not only through social relations in schools, but through an informal gender curriculum informed by conservative Christian doctrines and perceptions of 'authentic' Rwandan cultural mores. To this end, masculine domination is a multi-institutional system of oppression that necessitates multi-institutional solutions.

This exploratory study demonstrates that there is an urgent need for more in-depth research of a qualitative nature from critical feminist perspectives on the complex identities, experiences and outcomes of disabled women and girls in Rwanda. To more fully understand the complex gender relations that inform the social and educational experiences of disabled young women and girls, additional research from the perspectives of disabled boys on how and why they maintain masculine domination is crucial if such inequalities are to be challenged structurally and relationally. Furthermore, given the limited prevalence data about disabled youth, additional quantitative research is needed that more accurately captures the statistical significance of different types of impairments among the Rwandan population.

Finally, clearly crafted, explicit policies to improve disabled girls' and young women's social and educational experiences are needed in Rwanda and around the world. Efforts to address the complex needs of disabled girls through wider policies on 'vulnerable children' can result in policy 'patchwork' – a one-size-fits-all model that does not differentiate significantly the diverse groups regarded as vulnerable. If the educational policies and practices in Rwanda afford access to the most marginalized in Rwandan society, then all other groups will be empowered as well. Policies that focus expressly on women's disability rights can perhaps ensure this. The lasting economic competitiveness of former conflict-ridden states is arguably not contingent on prioritizing the non-disabled over the disabled, men over women, adults over children, disabled young men over disabled young

women. Balanced commitments to equity protect all citizens as potential contributors – especially disabled young women.

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