Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women Students with Mobility Disabilities Accessing Higher Education in Oman

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Abstract

The higher education system in Oman offers various services to support disabled students to create a positive relationship between students with disabilities, their families, and the community. Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development share the responsibility of educating students with disabilities. However, women students with disabilities, particularly those with mobility disabilities, still face challenges within higher education institutions. While Omani law allows women with disabilities to pursue higher education, it is uncertain whether women students with mobility disabilities encounter difficulties in accessing education at higher education institutions. Notably, there have been no studies specifically exploring the challenges faced by women students with mobility disabilities in this context. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap and investigate the experiences of women students with mobility disabilities in higher education institutions. The study used a qualitative research approach and employed phenomenology methodology. Purposive sampling based on specific criteria and snowballing were used. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were performed with 15 women students with mobility disabilities enrolled in various higher educational institutions in North Batinah Governorate, Oman. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, leading to the emergence of three main themes: Educational constraints, physical constraints, and psychological constraints. Discrimination based on gender and disability was evident due to cultural and religious factors. These themes highlighted the challenges faced by women students with mobility disabilities in accessing education. The study also identified a significant connection between these themes, leading to the theory of resilience. Resilience is displayed by these women students when facing such challenges. Understanding the obstacles faced by women students with mobility disabilities in higher education institutions can aid policymakers in devising better approaches to offer support and services to these students in Oman. Additionally, this knowledge can help address deficiencies in educational facilities within Oman's higher education institutions.

Keywords: Women students, Mobility disabilities, Higher education, Phenomenology, Oman

Introduction

Disability is a broad term that includes physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental health varieties. It refers to any state of the body or mind that makes it challenging for the person with the condition to engage in specific activities and interact with the world around them (Saketkoo et al., 2022). An estimated 10% of the global population, roughly 650 million people, live with one or more disabilities (Saketkoo et al., 2022). Disabilities can be caused by many factors, including injury, chronic illness, violence, malnutrition, inadequate therapy, and aging (Saketkoo et al., 2022). This global issue calls for a united effort, as 80% of individuals with disabilities reside in low to mid-economic countries, where they face economic challenges and limited access to

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essential services like education. The prevalence of disabilities among people in mid to high-economic countries ranges from 8% to 20% (Saketkoo et al., 2022).

Based on the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), countries in the ESCWA region have lower rates of individuals with disabilities than other regions (Pinilla-Roncancio & Rodríguez Caicedo, 2022). For instance, the disability rate is 0.5% in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 0.6% in Egypt, 1.9% in Yemen, and 4.8% in Sudan (Pinilla-Roncancio & Rodríguez Caicedo, 2022). These statistics are somewhat doubtful, as these societies tend to view disabilities as a stigma; thus, it is highly likely the numbers are underreported. It is crucial to understand the cultural context when interpreting these numbers. In low-income countries, women constitute up to three-quarters of individuals with disabilities (Bartha, 2019). Women with disabilities are more prevalent at 19% compared to men at 12% (Saketkoo et al., 2022; De Beco, 2021).

Globally, women with disabilities face more social and economic challenges, including limited access to higher education and healthcare services (Bartha, 2019). However, there is reason for optimism. Disability is no longer viewed solely as a medical issue but as a social one. This shift in perspective, particularly in the case of women with disabilities, is a significant step towards equality. Women with disabilities experience difficulties in accessing healthcare, housing, education, and employment (Bartha, 2019).

Additionally, they face discrimination in employment during hiring and promotions (Bartha, 2019). Historically, disability was viewed as a medical issue affecting both men and women. However, women's disabilities were not given equal consideration in terms of rights (Bartha, 2019). Today, disability is recognized internationally as a social issue, and the World Health Organization (WHO) is working to assist countries in creating policies for women with disabilities, ensuring early identification and treatment, and providing equal opportunities (Saketkoo et al., 2022; Bartha, 2019). This international recognition provides reassurance and support for the rights of women with disabilities. The United Nations has expressed that the right of women with disabilities to receive an education is fundamental (Dunkle et al., 2018). The UN stated that women with disabilities can receive an education in an inclusive, non-discriminatory environment (Dunkle et al., 2018). Nevertheless, women with disabilities still face discrimination and violence in trying to access and receive education in schools and universities. (Rajić Ćalić, 2022; Braunmiller & Dry, 2022).

It is urgent to address the numerous challenges that students with disabilities, particularly women students with disabilities, face in accessing education. Research studies (Rajić Ćalić, 2022; Rieser, 2017; Oliver, 2013) have shown that universities in many countries, including low to mid-economic ones, are far from students' residences thus requiring disabled students to commute for their education. This stance is a challenge for students, especially women with mobility disabilities, particularly those from low-income families who may struggle to afford transportation to and from the university (Rajić Ćalić, 2022; Amin et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2016). The physical environment also presents obstacles as inaccessible buildings and a lack of facilities hinder women students with disabilities from pursuing higher education (Rieser, 2017; Blunch, 2015). Additionally, women students with disabilities in higher education institutions often face attitudinal barriers within their universities (Blunch, 2015; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). Due to their gender, women students with disabilities do not receive equal services as men students with disabilities, such as recreational events and activities (Blunch, 2015). These findings highlight the various challenges faced by women students with disabilities due to gender in their pursuit of equal educational opportunities, including social, cultural, and religious obstacles (Addlakha, 2008). It

has been observed that women and girls with disabilities in many countries have unequal educational opportunities (Chahal, 2021). Research has shown that girls and women with hearing and intellectual disabilities receive inadequate educational opportunities compared to other learners (Nuri et al., 2022). Moreover, disabled women in rural regions of Indonesia are stigmatized, resulting in limited training and education opportunities (Kusumastuti et al., 2014). Additionally, in India, due to unequal opportunities for proper education, the literacy rate of women with disabilities was 7%, compared to the general literacy rate of 46% (Chahal, 2021). These findings indicate that disability restricts individuals, especially women, from educational opportunities in various social and cultural contexts.

Many workplaces are not prepared to support the equal participation of women with disabilities due to limited resources, and cultural factors including gender biases, and inaccessibility (Ballo, 2020). The employment rate for women with disabilities is not just lower than that of men with disabilities, it is a stark disparity that highlights a systemic issue (Ballo, 2020). Data from 51 countries shows that only 20% of women with disabilities are employed, compared with 53% of men with disabilities (Ballo, 2020). These findings underscore the obstacles that women with disabilities face, including gender bias, in their quest for equal employment opportunities (Ballo, 2020).

According to the Ministry of National Economy in Oman, a disabled person is defined as "a person who is suffering from a shortage of some of their sensory, physical, mental, moral, genetic factor, or disease, or accident, limiting their ability to perform their natural role in life compared to those in their age, and it constitutes all the needed care and rehabilitation until they can do their role in life" (Ministry of National Economy, 2018, p. 28). In Oman, there were about 41,303 people with various types of disabilities (Ministry of National Economy, 2019b). Based on gender distribution, 56% of disabled individuals were men, and 44% were women (Ministry of National Economy, 2019a). Among the disabled individuals in Oman, visually disabled individuals were the highest at 26.5%, followed by individuals with movement impairments at 10.7% and speech disability at 9.37% (Ministry of National Economy, 2019b). The highest rate of disabled individuals was in North Batinah Governorate in Oman (Ministry of National Economy, 2019b). There is a lack of reliable information on the number of people with disabilities, particularly among women, which may be due to stigma. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies were conducted in Oman exploring the challenges faced by women students with disabilities in higher education institutions in accessing and receiving their education. Consequently, this study aimed to explore the challenges faced by women students with mobility disabilities in their educational experience. The potential impact of improved accessibility and support for women students with mobility disabilities in higher education institutions is significant as it could inspire more women students with disabilities to pursue their studies, thereby improving their educational options and contributing to a more inclusive community.

The Research Study
Problem Statement

It is essential to recognize the need for collaboration among different disciplines, such as education and health, to provide comprehensive services to individuals with disabilities in Oman. The rate of individuals with disabilities in Oman is approximately 15.5 per thousand of the population. However, there is a lack of empirical research studies involving disabled individuals from this part of the world. Specifically, there are limited research studies related to disabled individuals, especially women with disabilities, in Oman. Additionally, there are a lack of studies

on the challenges faced by women students with disabilities in higher educational institutions. Particularly, it is crucial to explore the challenges experienced by women students with mobility disabilities in accessing learning within higher educational institutions in Oman. This study can help fill the gap in research on disabled individuals in Oman and contribute significantly to developing facilities, services, and support for students with disabilities in higher education.

Importance

Acknowledging the challenges faced by women students with physical disabilities in higher education institutions in Oman could aid in the development of facilities, services, and support for students with disabilities in higher education.

Research Question

What are the challenges faced by women students with mobility disability in higher education institutions in Oman?

Aim

This research study aims to explore the challenges faced by women students with mobility disability in higher education institutions in North Batinah Governorate in Oman.

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenology approach to achieve its objective. Phenomenology involves the unbiased and rigorous analysis of things as they appear to understand human experience. Husserl developed the strategy of phenomenological reduction to temporarily set aside subjective points of view and theoretical hypotheses and allow the phenomenon's essence to emerge. He emphasized understanding the lifeworld based on people's pre-reflective experiences before researchers impose their explanations. This method requires researchers to suspend any assumptions about the subject (bracketing) to make the phenomenon's essence apparent. Phenomenology focuses on personal human experience and the meaning of lived experiences, aiming to describe what all participants have in common regarding the phenomena under study. The study explores the lived experiences of women students with mobility disabilities in higher educational institutions in Oman. The interpretative phenomenological approach examines the meaning of these experiences for participants and how participants make sense of them.

Study Setting

All data was collected from higher educational institutions (governmental and non-governmental) in North Batinah Governorate (NBG).

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria crafted by the researchers following the topic are:

- Must be a woman student from Omani
- Must be 18 years of age or older
- Must study at one of the higher education institutions at NBG.
- Must only have a mobility disability

Sampling Strategy

Based on the specific inclusion criteria, purposive sampling was used to recruit 15 women students with mobility disabilities studying at higher educational institutions in NBG. These students, whose voices are crucial to the study, were asked about their experiences with disability and their challenges in accessing and receiving education within higher educational institutions. One interview was conducted with each participant, enabling a more in-depth exploration of their unique experiences and challenges.

The participants were recruited via poster advertisements by the recruiting team. The participant information sheet (PIS) was provided to those interested. The recruiting team obtained contact details and gave oral consent for the researchers to contact them. Then, the recruiting team acted as intermediaries, informing the researchers about potential participants who wanted to take part in the study and providing their contact details. The researchers then contacted the participants, answered their questions, and agreed on a time and place to conduct the interview. On the agreed date, informed consent was obtained before data collection began.

Data Collection Tool

Semi-structured (in-depth) interviews were conducted at participants' houses and utilized a flexible topic guide in Arabic. The researchers asked participants about demographic data and challenges in accessing Oman's higher education. All in-depth interviews were audio recorded and about one hour in length to ensure the participants felt respected and considered in the research process.

Data Processing and Techniques to Enhance Trustworthiness

This research process was interactive and engaging. Interviews were anonymized and coded, and the researchers assessed transcripts for accuracy. The researchers transcribed the data and recorded every word of the participants, thus the findings developed directly from the data. Triangulation was applied by gathering data from different participants at different governmental and non-governmental educational institutions. Reflexivity was a critical component, ensuring the rigor of this study. The researchers used the phenomenology approach, a rigorous criterion for our research. The researchers also made a concerted effort to discuss the issue of disability in more detail, fostering an interactive understanding of the essence and meaning of participants' views. This discussion prompted the researchers to think more reflexively about the language, meaning, social beliefs, and interpretative acts, placing the text at the forefront of the analysis and considering participants' words as reflections of the real world.

Data Synthesis and Management

Thematic analysis was utilized in this study. Thematic analysis is a flexible way that includes determining, investigating, and writing themes within the data. The six analysis phases are familiarizing oneself with the data, developing initial codes, searching themes, reanalyzing themes, describing and naming themes, and writing the report. All interviews were transcribed word-for-word. Data were coded by two researchers who met regularly to discuss the coding process and emerged codes and themes. Also, an expert researcher was invited to review the analysis process and confirm the findings. NVivo was used to manage the data.

Ethical Approval

The study acquired approval from the Ministry of Health Research and Ethical Committee in the Sultanate of Oman. Before conducting the study, the researchers discussed the study design and purpose with the administrative staff at selected higher educational institutions in the North Batinah Governorate in Oman to obtain permission for study allocation and access to facilities. The researchers made sure to fully inform all non-native women students with mobility disabilities about the study and its potential implications. They allowed the students to ask questions and told them they could withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable continuing the interview.

Results

In this study, all participants were single women with one or more mobility disability, six of whom were in wheelchairs, and nine used crutches. These individuals resided in the North Batinah Governorate of Oman. Table 1 shows that 40% of the women participants were between 21 and 25 years old, 46.7% were studying at Human Sciences Colleges, and 40% were at level three of their studies.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	N=15	%
Age		
<18	0	0%
18-20	4	26.7%
21-25	6	40%
>25	5	33.3%
Studying Sciences		
Human Sciences	7	46.7%
Scientific Sciences	5	33.3%
Health Sciences	3	20%
Level of Studying		
Year 1	1	6.7%
Year 2	3	20%
Year 3	6	40%
Year 4	5	33.3%

Source: Researchers' Field Work

To reiterate, this study focused on the experiences of women students with mobility disabilities and identified three main themes: educational constraints," "physical constraints," and "psychological constraints." Figure 1 illustrates the data analytic framework used in the study. These themes shed light on the difficulties women students with mobility disabilities encounter in accessing education within higher educational institutions in the North Batinah Governorate in Oman.

Figure 1: Data Analytic Framework
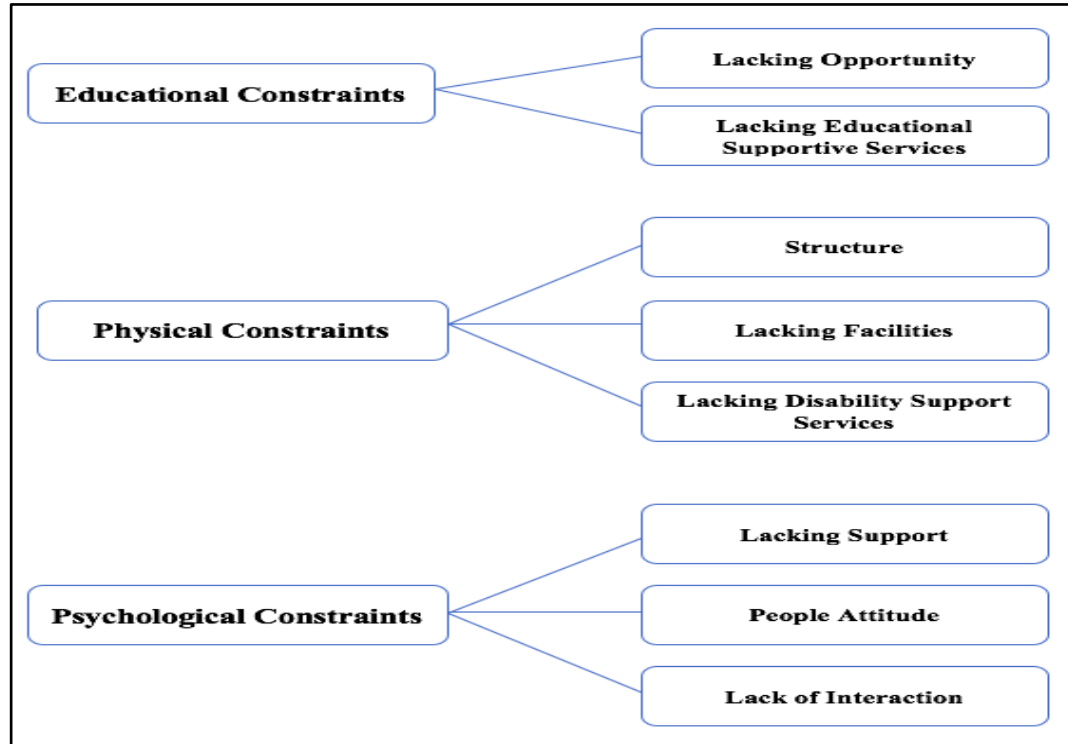
Source: Researchers' Field Work

Educational Constraints

This theme focuses on the educational obstacles encountered by women students with mobility disabilities in accessing higher education. These obstacles include the need for more specific academic opportunities such as accessible classrooms and specialized courses, support services like personal assistants and counseling, and extracurricular activities within higher educational institutions for female students with mobility disabilities.

One of the educational constraints was the lack of opportunity for women students with mobility disabilities to study what they were passionate about. A small number of women students (n=2) with mobility disabilities, who had achieved excellent grades in secondary school, were unable to pursue their desired fields of study, particularly in the USA. They attributed this to their gender and mobility disability. The participants' academic achievements were commendable, and they expressed their desire to study abroad but could not do so due to these barriers.

> I got 97 percent in secondary school, and I was one of the top students at secondary school…I love to study physical therapy to help people, but I could not because when I consulted my teacher, she said this specialty is not for you because you will not be able to do that with your condition. (Student 2)

> I wished to go to study out of my country, in the USA to study what I love, I got 95 percent in secondary school. I dreamed of being a civil engineer, but the teacher in career guidance did not advise me to study this specialty because of my mobility

> disability…Also, my family did not allow me to study in the US because I am a woman and they were worried about going out of the country because of my disability, also it is haram to travel without *Mihrim* (a male relevant). (Student 9)

Women students with mobility disabilities expressed that the staff and academics at higher educational institutions were unaware of the educational needs of women students with mobility disabilities. Most women students with mobility disabilities stated that staff and academic educators should have provided educational support services, such as soft copy study materials. These students faced difficulties in carrying hard-copy materials due to having mobility disabilities. For example, one student requested a digital textbook version, while another asked for advance soft copies of lecture notes. The educational institutions also lacked help centers staffed with experts who could provide educational support services for women students with mobility disabilities. All participants were highly concerned about the availability of educational support as they have repeatedly asked the university to provide soft copies of study materials since they could not carry heavy materials due to their gender and disability.

> Staff and teachers do not know that I have a mobility disability. They do not consider my need as a woman and as physically disabled. Sometimes when I'm moving from one building to another building, they do not consider my situation when I arrive late carrying heavy books and papers... nobody in the college can provide advice or education support for us...we need that. (Student 5)

> My college does not provide educational material in a soft copy...I asked several times for that...it is better to have a soft copy because it is difficult for me to carry lots of books and papers. It is heavy, and I become tired from carrying these books, thus I arrive late to classes and this is embarrassing…As a woman, it is not nice to carry all of these books because we are wearing a scarf and sometimes we need to arrange the scarf, and I cannot do that. Also, I have a mobility problem, and they don't consider my need for a soft copy. (Student 3)

Further, when it comes to extracurricular activities at university or college, women students with mobility disabilities have shared both positive and negative experiences. The positive experiences include making friends and joining clubs. Many participants emphasized the importance of friendships in their lives, especially in helping them deal with issues related to their disabilities. However, they have also faced obstacles such as accessing university career services, participating in community activities, and joining sports competitions. Women students with mobility disabilities have struggled to take part in both on-campus and off-campus activities, especially when these activities involve a mix of men and women, due to family opposition.

> I have had a good experience participating in the art club, and this helped me to find friends who share the same hobby...this also helped me to cope with the challenges I face due to being a woman with a mobility disability. (Student 14)

> I have had a bad experience doing other activities not related to studying...I cannot do work within the college due to my disability...also I cannot participate in community services such as beach cleaning and clubs because my family refuses

> to allow me. According to my family, this is not women's work, and as a woman, I cannot clean at the beach or participate in clubs with men...Also, the college does not have a sports competition for disabled people because we are few. (Student 11)

In summary, discrimination based on gender and disability was evident in higher educational institutions, limiting opportunities for women students with mobility disabilities due to cultural and religious factors, as well as a lack of facilities.

Physical Constraints

Although higher education institutions made accommodations for women students with mobility disabilities by assigning them to the nearest university or college and providing them with a reasonable monthly allowance, these students faced significant challenges. When discussing the participants' experiences, it becomes apparent that the building structure, campus, facilities, and support accessibility were uncomfortable and inadequate for them. The majority had negative experiences with facilities, support services, and physical structures, which impacted their access. They felt the university or college should have addressed their needs and concerns and provided better support. Many participants expressed that they were unable to participate in public sports due to family refusal and religious considerations, which limited their involvement in various sports activities. According to them, there were no private places for women to engage in sports or physical activities within higher education institutions, further discouraging their participation. They further noted, that public sports were not an issue for students who were men(with or without disabilities). Still, it was a problem for women students due to cultural and religious rules.

> The college is not far from my house, and I receive a salary from higher education; this is good due to my condition, but still, it is difficult to access services in my college…. I cannot do sports in public. There are some activities that I can do which is simple, but my family will not allow me because it is haram in Islam to do activities that might expose some parts of my body like hair. (Student 8)

Also, participants conveyed that, most of the time, facilities within higher educational institutions, such as the library, were filled and occupied with men, which delayed them from accessing the resources as they had to wait in queues.

> I have to wait a long time if I want to get books from the library…it is filled with male students, and I need time to get the book then when I want to reserve it. I need to wait in queues. (Student 9)

The women students with mobility disabilities in the study expressed that the physical structures of the university or college campus were complex and inaccessible. They faced numerous obstacles while trying to access classrooms and university events. For example, one student was late for an exam due to obstacles on the road, excessive sun exposure, and the challenge of wearing a long dress or *Abaya*. According to these students, these obstacles not only pose difficulties for but also for non-disabled women students. They also described the challenges of moving around the campus due to overcrowding of all students and poor road conditions. The overcrowded space, particularly with men, made women with mobility disabilities uncomfortable, and they felt embarrassed.

Additionally, the students have also experienced the risk of falling.

> We can get access and services but there are a lot of barriers affecting my access to learning. There are no facilities for us within the campus of the university...for example, my classrooms are crowded and sometimes I cannot find a space for me as I am sitting in my wheelchair. Often, I arrived late to do exams because I felt tired moving under the sun in my wheelchair... there are no support services for disabled students. We have general support services for all students. And, it is crowded with male students, and I feel shy. (Student 10)

> The cafeteria and library are crowded with many male and female students, and we do not have a special line for us as females and as a disabled student...there are limited toilets for disabled students as well within female toilets... Several times I arrived late for the exams because I walked with the help of a crutch and wore an *Abaya*. This was too much as my *Abaya* became dirty because of the roads, and I could not elevate my *Abaya* because I walked using a crutch. The road was not well-constructed and many times I nearly fell. We could get access but with many struggles… this is an issue not only for me as a mobility disabled but also for normal female students. (Student 8)

> Yes we can get access but it is difficult because the roads within the campus are full of obstructions; for example, cars are parked here and there especially during special events like graduation days or conferences…Also, the roads are overcrowded with male and female students, the road is not good and I was afraid of falling…we need a special road for disabled students and should know the timing of events. (Student 7)

> As a female student with a mobility disability, I need to go from one building to another...though I can get services and access, it is difficult for me to go to classrooms, the cafeteria, and the library…. I cannot travel to different buildings unless someone accompanies me as I nearly fell several times. It is embarrassing because we have male students as well. (Student 4)

In sum, the influence of cultural and religious factors led to discrimination based on gender and disability, as most services were predominantly used by men thus limiting access to services for women, especially those with mobility disability. Within higher educational institutions, the buildings, campus, and accessibility of support and facilities were uncomfortable and inadequate for women students with mobility disabilities. Many participants expressed the need for special services tailored to their needs. Moreover, the absence of private and enclosed facilities for women students to participate in activities like sports limited their opportunity to participate in physical exercises.

Psychological Constraints

The participants reported that they had come to terms with their condition at an early age. However, they felt that strangers did not treat them as equal members of society, leading to social isolation and a limited social circle. These students also expressed that men tended to view them

with pity, making them feel different from their peers. They emphasized the need for psychological support to aid them in their education and stressed that they did not seek empathy as it made them feel inferior. What they truly desired was equal treatment, not pity, from their peers and society.

> I knew for a long time that I had a mobility disability, and I accepted that. I am not the first one…people look at me in different ways. I do not like that. They look to me as if I am not like them. The students also look at me in the same way I feel I am different. (Student 12)

> People look at us with empathy, especially men, and I don't like that because I feel that I am not a normal woman…Yes, I need psychological support but not because I feel low. I am normal like other students and other women and because of this I do not go out too much, and I don't have lots of friends. (Student 9)

The interaction with other students, faculty, and administrators posed significant challenges for the participants. Many felt they were treated differently, thus resulting in a limited social circle. The participants also seemed to have a prevailing perception that they could not fully take part in social environments, making them feel isolated from their non-disabled peers. They expressed a strong desire to be included in social activities and events. On numerous occasions, they felt that their physical abilities were underestimated, which had a profound impact on their psychological well-being. This underestimation underscores the seriousness of the issue and emphasizes the urgent need for a more inclusive social environment within higher education institutions. This change is long overdue.

> I have few close friends; students look at me differently...not like normal students. They treat me differently; I feel I am not a woman like them because I cannot do what they do. (Student 8)

> People see us in different ways, they see us as if we are unable, but we can do like them...in many events, they do not accept us to participate in sports activities with other female students and sometimes with social activities...only a few students talk to me, and we are friends. (Student 15)

In summary, women students with mobility disabilities accepted their condition early in life, but disability discrimination was still evident. People around them treated them differently, making them feel like they were not like other students and were inferior. Men looked at them with pity. As a result, the participants preferred not to receive empathy because they wanted to feel normal and be treated like everyone else.

Discussion

Three main themes were identified: educational constraints, "physical constraints," and "psychological constraints." From these three themes, gender discrimination was apparent in this study due to cultural and religious factors.

Gender discrimination is a kind of bias that derives from the social disparities that exist between men and women, leading to unfair treatment by viewing one as superior to the other (Popa & Bucur, 2014). In this study, according to the participants, there were no equal chances for

education between men and women in Oman. The opportunities were mainly for men when they wanted to study abroad and chose to study their area of interest due to cultural and religious factors. Due to gender discrimination, there was a lack of higher educational institutions, educational opportunities, services, and facilities for women students with mobility disability, which were considered to be barriers to accessing and receiving an education. Lack of insurance, unavailable equipment, transport facilities, and a lack of information and clarity impacted women with disability access to education (Matin et al., 2021). These challenges led the participants to feel they were different and limited as women and as disabled. These results were found in a systematic review where the authors discussed that women with disability encountered many sociocultural factors, such as negative attitudes, being ignored, and violence, which impacted their access to services (Matin et al., 2021). The consequences of gender and disability have led to women with disabilities encountering low rates of education and employment (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2017). In this study, gender inequity among women students with mobility disabilities appeared due to cultural and religious factors, which affected their access to education and services. This finding was shown in a study where the authors stated that people with disabilities encountered disparities in education and occupation, and these outcomes also varied for men and women (Pettinicchio & Maroto, 2017).

Women students with mobility disabilities have reported that most of the services within higher education institutions are predominantly used by men. In a study by Pokharel (2008), the perceived factors responsible for this discrimination were analyzed, with gender and customary practices identified as the main aspects. In a male-dominated society, men often perceive themselves as superior to women and thus impose restrictions (Pokharel, 2008). Women are generally not allowed to move freely under the guise of protection (Pokharel, 2008). Gender discrimination is highly ingrained in the culture and society, establishing a hierarchical association between men and women. It is a cultural rule accepted by women and enforced by men as a social value (Saha, 2013). Oman is an Islamic and male-dominated society where women are considered secondary to men, although with specific considerations. Different expectations and behaviors are enforced for boys and girls within the Omani context. This discrimination has reinforced the hierarchical relationship between men and women in society and has also led to the building of rigid gender standards that limit women's opportunities (Saha, 2013).

Research has shown that women with disabilities may encounter a double burden due to discrimination based on gender and disability (Emmett & Alant, 2006). In this study, participants have expressed their desire to be seen as ordinary women and not be viewed with pity by men due to their mobility disabilities. The way someone looks can impact how others perceive and judge them. Women students with mobility disabilities do not want to be seen differently by other genders; they want to feel like non-disabled women. People often assume a person's attractiveness and personality based on physical appearance (Hu et al., 2018). Physical attractiveness can also affect how competent someone is perceived to be socially (Hu et al., 2018) as well as the initial impression of whether someone is trustworthy, or a potential romantic partner (South Palomares & Young, 2018).

To continue, the research found three interconnected themes, leading to the emergence of the theory of resilience. Gender discrimination led to the development of this theory, which explains that women students with mobility disabilities do not receive equal opportunities as men and are treated differently, which leads to them feeling different and inferior. As a result, they want to prove that they are not different and show that they are empowered. Their resilience stemmed from their desire to feel and be treated just like non-disabled students.

Resilience, in general, is "the capacity to resist or successfully cope with difficulty" (Benkohila et al., 2020, p.16). Resilience theory explores how individuals respond to stressful events or challenges and how effectively they adapt to such experiences. Werner and Smith (2019) studied resilient children who managed to thrive despite adversity. Further research in this area has revealed that individuals demonstrate varying levels of resilience (Scoloveno, 2015). Resilience is shaped by internal and external protective factors that enable individuals to overcome challenges (Rutter, 2023). Resilient individuals exhibit a strong sense of self-belief, determination, and self-efficacy (MacLeod et al., 2016; Rutter, 2023). Hornor (2017) identified various protective factors contributing to resilience, including internal factors like intelligence, sense of joy, and locus of control (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016). The role of determination in resilience is particularly inspiring, as it shows that individuals can confound the most difficult situation. One or more protective factors can mitigate the impact of adversity (Masten & Cicchetti, 2016), indicating that the more protective factors an individual possesses, the more resilient they are likely to be.

The research data indicates that women students with mobility disabilities can access education despite facing various challenges by being resilient. These students are resilient and adapt to difficulties in higher educational institutions using strategies they have developed. These strategies include seeking support from friends (limited though they may be), receiving family support (particularly from their mothers), and maintaining a positive mindset. Those who believe positively in their capabilities and effectiveness are more likely to succeed and cope with challenges (Vaughan-Johnston & Jacobson, 2020). Self-efficacy plays a significant role in the resilience of women students, which ultimately impacts their ability to persevere in education despite obstacles. Albert Bandura, the originator of the concept of self-efficacy, defined it as a perception of "how well one can manage courses of action needed to deal with prospective situations" (qtd. in Vancouver et al., 2014, p. 31). Self-efficacy is considered a key factor influencing resilience (Cooper et al., 2021) and is associated with various levels of resilience (Jackson & Waller, 2021). For instance, research has shown that individuals with high self-efficacy demonstrate increased resilience in the face of adversity (Van Zyl & Dhurup, 2018).

In this study, women students with disabilities were resilient when dealing with difficulties, allowing them to access education and demonstrate that they are just like any other students. The participants did not want to be seen as inferior, especially by men. Adaptive strategies played a crucial role in enabling these students to be resilient. Their unique experiences and challenges were a cause of their drive to reflect on their identity and prove that they were just like others. Thus, it is essential to reposition women students with mobility disabilities as independent individuals with personal preferences and needs. Higher educational institutions should be aware of the needs of these students as women and disabled. Inclusion of students with disabilities, especially women, in higher educational institutions is not just about quantitative representation; it should enhance our understanding of social citizenship for women students with disabilities (Sandberg, 2015).

Overall, the academic, physical, and psychological challenges faced by women students with mobility disabilities in higher educational institutions need urgent attention. Discrimination based on gender and disability due to cultural and religious factors has made it difficult for these students to access education. Students like the participants require tailored services and private facilities to engage fully in educational and extracurricular activities. Their acceptance of their condition should not overshadow the need for psychological support to help them feel like any other woman or student. Educational institutions must address these issues and provide the necessary support for these students to thrive.

Conclusion and Limitations

The interview data revealed three main themes: "educational constraints," "physical constraints," and "psychological constraints." These themes explain the challenges faced by disabled women students in accessing education within higher education institutions in North Batinah Governorate in Oman. The data showed that discrimination based on gender and disability was apparent within higher education institutions due to cultural and religious factors. There was a connection between the three themes, which led to the emergence of the theory of being resilient. This theory explains that women with mobility disabilities were resilient to challenges in higher educational institutions. The reason for their resilience was that they wanted to prove that they were not different as human beings in their goals and desires and should be treated like any other.

Understanding these challenges faced by women with disabilities in accessing education within higher educational institutions could inspire policymakers in Oman to develop transformative facilities, services, and support for all students with disabilities in higher education. For instance, the Ministry of Higher Education could pioneer the development of special facilities or services for students with disabilities, such as a special walking place. Additionally, activating disabled supportive services within higher education institutions could be a game-changer, helping students with disabilities cope with their study requirements and obtain the support they need.

It is crucial to recognize that this study was conducted in a specific region of Oman, and further research is imperative to determine the generalizability of the findings to the entire country. This underscores the vital role of researchers in shaping policies and practices that can truly make a difference in the lives of women with disabilities.

Acknowledgments

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