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On: 17 July 2015, At: 11:52

Publisher: Routledge

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## Disability & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdso20>

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Published online: 29 Jun 2015.



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To cite this article: Zuraidah Don, Ali Salami & Amir Ghajarieh (2015) Voices of girls with disabilities in rural Iran, *Disability & Society*, 30:6, 805-819, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2015.1052042](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1052042)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1052042>




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## Voices of girls with disabilities in rural Iran

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(Received 8 June 2014; final version received 13 May 2015)

This paper investigates the interaction of gender, disability and education in rural Iran, which is a relatively unexplored field of research. The responses of 10 female students with disabilities from Isfahan indicated that the obstacles they faced included marginalization, difficulties in getting from home to school, difficulties within the school building itself, and discrimination by teachers, classmates and school authorities. The data collected for the study contain a wide range of conservative gendered discourses, and show how traditional gender beliefs interact with disability to aggravate the problems faced in education by young women with disabilities. It is hoped that the findings will raise awareness among policy-makers of the many formidable obstacles that make it difficult for young women with disabilities to achieve their full potential in education.

**Keywords:** rural; Iran; disability; education; gender; patriarchy

### Points of interest

- This paper investigates the interaction of gender, disability and education in rural Iran, which is a relatively unexplored area.
- Research in rurality and disability can help reveal different aspects of identity.
- Since education plays an important role in empowering female students in rural areas, the experiences of such people is of importance in research.
- The data collected for the study contain a wide range of conservative gendered discourses, and show how traditional beliefs interact with disability.
- It is hoped the findings of this study will raise awareness of policy-makers who may unintentionally neglect the many formidable obstacles that keep girls with disabilities from achieving their full potential in education.
- This awareness may encourage policy-makers to take the necessary steps to improve access to education for girls with disabilities in rural areas and make them part of the wider community.

### Introduction

More than 70 per cent of the world's poor live in rural areas (Atchoarena and Gasperini 2003). On a global scale, urban areas enjoy a higher standard of living

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than rural areas, and the majority of rural people face difficulties seldom encountered in urban areas. For instance, there are still homes in the rural United States without plumbing and electricity, where sewage may run open in the streets (Housing Assistance Council 2012, 6). The vast majority of rural people in Iranian villages live below the poverty line (Kalantari et al. 2008), and face adversity because of geographical isolation and the lack of economic opportunity. According to Kalantari et al. (2008, 725), more than 65% of the villages 'have populations less than 250 persons, which do not provide sufficient population threshold for ... services and sustainable economic and job creation activities'.

The primary activity in rural Iran is farming (Aref 2011, 498), for which a strong agricultural workforce is required, and small families may place the economic survival of rural households at risk. In this context, individuals with disabilities who cannot work constitute extra mouths to feed. The need for the labour of wives and children encourages peasants not only to marry early (Azkia 2002), but to marry someone who can help them on the farm, which makes it more difficult for disabled women to get offers of marriage. They are more dependent on their fathers and brothers for their livelihood. Together with traditional patriarchy, which represents a powerful cultural ideal, these characteristics of rural Iran may contribute to shaping the gendered subjectivity of girls with disabilities, and to the gender beliefs that they may experience.

In this article we explore the problems facing rural girls with disabilities in Iran, and how the intersection of gender and disabilities reflects the specific context of rural life. The intersectional approach socially locates the participants 'in the context of their real lives' (Weber 2004, 123), which explains why we subject their discourse to analysis to examine the complexity of their lives through their own perspectives.

Our aim is to fill the gap in the literature foregrounding the voices of rural girls with disabilities (Bryant and Pini 2011) and to capture the diversity of their experiences, making visible what is invisible and giving voice to those silenced and under-represented. The participants constitute the intersection of three disadvantaged groups: girls, rural people and people with disabilities. Their multiple identities necessitate a new form of inquiry which foregrounds inequalities and subordination related to gender, disability and rurality, and how the intersection of these factors shapes their lives and experiences.

### **Gender, disability and rurality**

The recent move pioneered by feminist disability scholars to examine disability from a socio-contextual perspective challenges the hegemony of the medical model of disability (Morris 1996). Wendell (1989), for example, critiques the model for considering disability as an individual's biological condition alone, and ignores the disabling conditions which are part of the social environment. It is necessary to look at 'disability from experiences of people with disabilities' (Knoll 2012, 11), where many of the problems faced are caused by society's failure to care for their needs.

The social model tends to pay less attention to personal experience of disability and to downplay the importance of impairment, 'which even in a barrier-free social environment would still put disabled people at a disadvantage' (Davaki et al. 2013, 8). It has been criticized from a feminist perspective for its failure to take into account the pain and limitations experienced because of the persistent impairment (Crow 1996). Shakespeare (2006) proposes a more balanced approach, considering

not only the disabling environmental factors but also the role of impairments in the way disabled people experience their condition.

In many developed countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, the independent living approach for people with disabilities primarily found in urban spaces is gradually superseding the medical definition of disability. Although legislative and regulatory approaches have made gains in mainstreaming them, unnecessary barriers continue to limit their mobility and access to public resources (Pineda 2008, 111), especially in the rural poor. In Iran, for example, people with disabilities still face the problem of inadequate facilities (Moore and Kornblat 2011), and the situation is much worse for the rural poor who live in very disadvantaged circumstances. What is more disturbing is the question of how to tend to the needs of people with disabilities when the needs of even the non-disabled have not been fulfilled, this being one of the main reasons for the lack of financial support (Moore and Kornblat 2011, 18).

Begum (1992) emphasizes the need to view disability through a gender lens in order to address women's subjective experiences of disability. Interrogating disability from a feminist perspective draws attention to women's subjective experiences of disability, citing the difficulties that – unlike disabled men – they may face with family, body image and sexuality (see also Grue and Laerum 2002).

For females with disabilities, it is not the one category 'female' that shapes their lives, but also the intersection of gender and disability. The problem is that traditional gender beliefs still prevail in Iran, particularly in rural and tribal areas (Khordvani 2012), where men commonly consider their wives and daughters as property, and protect the family's social position through control over them.

Work on the intersection of gender and difference is arguably in its infancy (Bryant and Pini 2011), and most researchers in women's studies rarely include disability (Ferri and Gregg 1998), perhaps partly because disability 'may sit uneasily with a narrative of celebrating female power, competence, and strength' (Thomas 2006 cited by Bryant and Pini 2011, 101). However, in the scholarship of feminist disability studies, disability is integrated as a modality of difference (Garland-Thomson 1994).

The concept of intersectionality is adopted by feminist disability studies to theorize and examine the intersection between gender and disability and how it shapes the multiple dimensions of women's experiences (Emmett and Alant 2007) as a result of their 'positions in the social world' (Berger and Guido 2008, 1); for example, the unequal position of black women with disabilities in the job market. As Knoll (2012, 16) argues, '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'.

Even less developed is research that examines the way gender intersects with rurality and disability (McCall 2005), although around 70% of women with disabilities live in the rural areas of low and middle-income countries (United Nations Enable 2011). Research on rurality tends to focus on 'space, isolation, community, poverty [...]' (Balfour et al. 2008, 101) and to pay less attention to the rural people themselves and their lived everyday experiences as rural people. This is even more so for rural people with disabilities. Their voices and 'lived everyday experiences as rural people are absent from much of the literature on disabilities and rurality' (Bryant and Pini 2011, 102).

The disadvantage of rural females with disabilities lies at the intersection of gender, disability and rurality, which is the focus of this study. For example, the lack of access to education in rural Iran could contribute to marginalizing the rural poor, especially girls with disabilities who less likely than the non-disabled to be educated and married, which explains why they are more likely to live in poverty (Pincus 2011).

Research on gender and rurality suggests that rurality influences the gender identities of women (Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006), and in the case of education, rurality plays a pivotal role in shaping their experiences (Moletsane and Ntombela 2010). Not much research has been carried out to show how gender and rurality intersect with other social dimensions, including disability and age (Bryant and Pini 2011). Erevelles (2011, 6) emphasizes the significance of linking disability studies to feminism by explaining why bodies matter in the ‘political economy’. In the context of the current study, and with reference to Erevelles’ (2011) assertion, one can argue that the reconstruction of disability and gender in rural areas is governed by the political economy of such spaces, which dictates further boundaries for females with disabilities. For example, 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 (see, for example, Salehi-Isfahani 2008). In adverse economic conditions, for example, females with disabilities in rural areas are particularly vulnerable, because cuts in public spending may further restrict ‘access to education and later on to the labour market and perpetuate inequalities’ (Davaki et al. 2013, 11) at their expense.

In a groundbreaking study on the intersection between rurality, disability and gender, Bryant and Pini (2011) investigate the way a farming accident that left Gayle with a physical disability shaped her life as a rural woman with a disability. They used textual analysis to examine the everyday experiences of Gayle and Mac, a young newly married couple living in rural Australia. The depiction of disability through Gayle’s own voice is ‘a vehicle to tell a story about rurality, [...] heterosexuality, and ... stories about gender, whiteness, and class’ (Bryant and Pini 2011, 116), and shows how rurality can be highly constraining for a person with a disability. Her experiences demonstrate that ‘there was more to the categories “rural woman” and “rural man” than portrayed in the literature’ (2011, 15), which this study seeks to elucidate.

## Methodology

Drawing insights from the intersectional approach, in particular Bryant and Pini (2011) on gender, rurality and disability, we examine the discourse of 10 secondary female students with disabilities from rural Isfahan obtained from semi-structured interviews, each lasting about 30 minutes. One person was assigned to record and take notes of the responses or any relevant details. The interviews were transcribed orthographically, and the selected excerpts were shown to the participants before being included in the analysis. Gathering data in Iran’s rural area is a cumbersome task because of ‘a lack of organization and funding’ (Soori and Naghavi 1998, 222), and statistics are regarded as a national security issue which cannot be shared with the public at large (Ghajarieh et al. 2012).

The methodology is based on oral history, which involves documenting individuals’ memories about their experiences and everyday life (Perks and Thomson

1998), and is appropriate for recording the experiences of minority groups marginalized in institutional settings (Riordon 2004). The transcribed interviews were encoded using Nvivo9 to identify the emerging themes that demonstrate the interconnections between representations of gender, rurality and disability.

Sunderland's (2004, 31) gendered discourses framework is used to analyse the discourses, which are 'interpretatively identifiable in part through linguistic traces'. This framework focuses on identifying and naming gendered discourses, particularly the constitutive dimension of discourse, which can be subversive or traditional. These discourses are supported or resisted through linguistic choices. We analysed the relevant linguistic features involved in the construction of these discourses, which can be detected because of 'the systemicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving ... formed within a particular context' (Mills 1997, 17).

The following are the questions asked, although the interviewer was not required to keep to the exact wording:

1. Can you share with us any experiences or difficulties that you have faced as a person with a disability?
  - Is your school building accessible for disabled students like you?
  - How did the principal, teachers, and classmates react when they first met you?
  - What do your classmates think of your disabilities? Are they helpful? Can you share any bad experiences or difficulties with them?
  - What do your teachers and principal think of your disabilities? Are they helpful? Can you share any experiences or difficulties with them?
2. What are your experiences with transportation to school?
  - How do you get to school?
  - Did you face difficulties going to school and coming home?
  - Did you have any experience of waiting alone at school when your other classmates had already left the school premises? Can you share with us any difficulties or bad experiences that you faced while waiting alone for someone to bring you home?
3. What do your family members think of your disabilities? Are they helpful? Can you share your experiences with them?
  - Who usually helps you most with your schoolwork at home?
  - Who usually accompanies you to school and brings you home?
4. Describe your typical day.
  - How many people work on the farm?
  - Who works on the farm?
  - Do you help your family members on the farm? Please explain.
  - Do you help your mother at home? Please explain.
  - Who works at home and who is the breadwinner in your family?
  - Do your family members expect you to work and earn your own living?
5. Do you have ambitions?
  - What would you like to work as?
  - If you plan to quit school, who do you think will take care of you in the

future? When you become an adult, will you be financially and/or emotionally supported by your family members?

- Would you like to continue your studies to college level?
- Would you like to get married in the future?

The interview questions tend to focus on education-related issues because education is essential for employment, reducing poverty and improving the living conditions of people with disabilities. The girls' experiences are fundamental to understanding the conditions that shape their lives and the way they think.

To make sure nothing is left out, at the end of the interview participants were asked to think of some questions which the interviewer could have asked but did not. To avoid shaping responses based on questions raised in the interview, the authors kept a neutral tone in queries regarding disability issues and all of the follow-up questions were designed in a fashion so that the participants did not directly receive any hints regarding the stance of the authors in the study.

### **Analysis**

The participants were aged between 13 and 16, and from farming families in remote villages. They come from big families and their houses are adjacent to the farm land. The participants have one or more (indicated by the number in brackets) of the following specific impairments: visual impairment (two cases), hard of hearing (two cases), hearing impairment (one case), spinal cord injury (one case), paralysis (two cases), and limb amputation (two cases). The names used are pseudonyms.

The school education system is divided into four levels: pre-school, primary, middle, and secondary. Students enrol in a new school for each new level. Elementary education and primary education are mandatory for all, and children in rural areas have access to schools in their own district.

The girls have to travel considerable distances to get to school because there are no secondary schools in their villages. They rely on their father or brother to take them. The expenses incurred in enrolling children in school and the transportation required to get to the school are a burden for low-income parents. This explains why secondary-age girl students with disabilities, especially those from poor families, tend to drop out of school. The school is typically a three-storey building and not designed for easy access for children with disabilities. The physical environment makes it difficult for these girls to attend school, which may put further pressure on their parents to protect them by keeping them at home, even if this means a loss of education.

Selected narratives were analysed to find out the participants' lived experiences in specific contexts, namely at home and at school. The analysis is divided into three parts according to the dominant themes emerging in their narratives: education and gender roles, embodied experiences at school, and mobility and accessibility in school. While the first focuses on their views about gender roles and education, the second and third deal with their experiences outside their homes – namely their experiences with the people they came into contact with at school and the physical constraints relating to access to school and mobility on the school premises.

### **Gender roles and education**

The small village in which 13-year-old Maryam and 15-year-old Zohreh live is far removed from urban Iran, not only in terms of the surrounding environment but also



of a specific set of values that rural people share. The following excerpts are analysed to bring out the recurring themes concerned with the role expectations of female and male members of the family, and the role of education in their life.

Maryam relates her feelings with respect to the role expectations of men and women:

Since I live in this small village and I am disabled, *no one expects me to work*. I think *if I were a man*, my life would be difficult.

Maryam's narrative constructs a commonsense attitude and opinion about her breadwinning status, namely that as a disabled girl she is not expected to earn her own living. She presents this claim of knowledge '... no one expects me to work' as true, committing herself completely to it. Note how she constructs the cause-effect relationship between rurality and disability, and what is expected of her as a female member of the family with respect to work. Maryam subscribes to the ideology of distinct gender roles, the female self 'not expected to work' in contrast to the male other, the breadwinner. She sets up a hypothetical situation stating that if she was a man 'life would be difficult'.

Another recurring theme is the view that education for females is not important because men are the breadwinners. Zohreh says:

I don't go to school after this year since I don't need to have a job. Girls' education is not important. My father and my brothers support me financially.

Zohreh plays down the importance of education for her because as a girl she does not 'need to have a job', which she regards as the purpose of education. However, we are not told whether her decision not to continue with her education was her own or influenced by the male members of the family. There is a sense of quiet acceptance in the way she presents herself with respect to education and her environment, namely her home environment as a female member of the family.

Zohreh represents the farm as a potential workplace for the male members of the family. The home, in contrast, represents the domain of domesticity where women are expected to contribute as reflected below:

When my brother gets older, he will help father and my other brothers on the farm. Me and my sisters will stay at home doing the cooking and taking care of home and babies. I guess if I don't go to school this year – with all these problems I have at school to move around – nothing will happen. My brothers and father work and make money for us, and education for me is meaningless now. (Zohreh)

This narrative is a good example of a mix of discourses with words associated with rurality ('farm'), disability ('problems ... to move around'), education ('school') and gender ('Me and my sisters will stay at home doing the cooking ...' in contrast to 'My brothers and father work and make money for us' co-occur in the same text). The men are assigned the role of breadwinner even at a very young age, which highlights their responsibility to provide for all of them.

Zohreh relates her personal sense of who she is in terms of her gendered identity, which is oriented towards motherhood, determined by the things that the female siblings do at home. Again, she trivializes the role of education in her life, 'education for me is meaningless now'. With the financial support from her 'brothers and father' she feels that nothing will happen to her if she 'does not go to school'. However, we can detect some uncertainty on her part, reflected by 'I guess'.

In general, Zohreh's narrative suggests that her knowledge of the world is restricted to working on the farm, which is strongly associated with men. She supports the binary division between men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, and regards education as not important except to get a job. Here we see the reinforcement of a patriarchal system in which women are dependent on men, and subject to male domination, particularly with respect to the world of work and education.

What is also interesting is that all of the participants were more concerned about the financial burden on their family if they were to go to school than continuing with their education. Their fathers were farmers, and education was a luxury for them. There was a general feeling that they could contribute more by helping their mothers in the home. A binary gender system is set up, based on the traditional gender roles of men and women; household income being the responsibility of the male members of the family, and the domestic sphere being the realm of the female members. Gender is established as a relationship between men and women, and is usually seen as operating hierarchically; men being the protectors and providers, women the recipients. In this regard, getting an education is at best of secondary importance, especially in the context where the girls are also disabled. These unequal power relations produce stereotypes of masculinity and femininity with role expectations, and these define the approved ways of performing gender in rural Iran.

### **Embodied experiences at school**

Yasmin, Zohreh and Zahra related their personal experiences of disability at school, which drew attention to their physical difference, a continual reminder of their otherness. They exemplify the view that the body cannot be separated from the notion of disability (Crow 1996). The girls describe their encounters with teachers, the school principal and classmates in specific contexts. Theirs are stories of harassment and being positioned as the object of pity, and the perception that education is not necessary for rural girls with disabilities.

From Yasmin's narrative it is clear that while her impairment is highly visible, paradoxically she is also at the same time invisible in that she is not seen as attractive enough to stimulate male interest. Yasmin is rendered invisible because her disabled body does not meet the expectations of hegemonic body forms. She relates what it was like for her when she told her brother that she was being harassed by her teacher:

One time I was waiting for my brother to come after me when all students already left. My brother came later than the usual time and since I was alone with my teacher, he tried to harass me. When I told my brother he said he just laughed [...] and said '*no one does anything to you since you are disabled*'. (Yasmin)

Yasmin's brother contradicts her, saying categorically that '*no one does anything to you since you are disabled*'. Her disability is presented as a deterrent which suggests two contrasting possibilities: it makes her the object of pity so no one will harm her, or it is a put-off because only non-disabled girls are sexually harassed. This brings into focus the physically deformed self, which is abject and sexually undesirable (Garland-Thomson 2005).

What is more worrying is that her complaint that she was being harassed was taken so lightly even by her own brother, and regarded as something impossible. Disabled girls find it more difficult to convince others of sexual harassment against

them, because others tend to regard them as non-sexual. The mention of disability immediately conjures the image of the deformed physical self. The disabled are categorized as a collective other with no regard for their individual differences, and this may lead to omission and marginalization of people with different disabilities (van Leeuwen 2008). Different impairments impinge in different ways with different implications for individual capacity.

This is illustrated by an experience recounted by Mahtab when she and her father met the schoolmaster to enrol her as a student in a school. She said:

The first day I went to enroll at my new secondary school with daddy. The schoolmaster asked my dad if your daughter is disabled, then where is her wheel-chair? Me and daddy both laughed since I have a hearing problem, and the school master thought a disabled person must have a wheel chair. [...] the schoolmaster asked my father why he wants to enroll me as I'm a girl. My father just kept quiet, but later he told me the schoolmaster was right, you can help your mother at home rather than coming to school for next year. (Mahtab)

It contains elements supporting the discourse that 'a disabled person must have a wheel chair', and traditional gendered discourse that 'girls do not need education'. She is marginalized not only with respect to her disability, but also to the gendered female self. Mahtab reports that the schoolmaster asked her father why he wanted her to be educated as she was a girl, which caused her father to decide to stop her going to school. In the rural area, school principals and teachers are highly regarded, so what they say will be taken seriously and, as Mahtab's case illustrates, have grave consequences for the disabled child's future life.

Constructing students with disabilities as the object of pity is another way of othering them which reinforces their differences, portraying them as pitiful, weak and dependent. Here Zohreh recounted how well-meaning people related to her as a person with disability, from her teacher's teary-eyed reaction to the constant offer of help from her classmates.

My teacher always get teary eyes when they see my situation ... my classmates also help me a lot; one of them says we should help needy people and she considers me as one.

One of the students represents people like herself ('the nondisabled') as having the moral obligation to help the 'needy people', which includes Zohreh who is categorized as belonging to that collective group. The moral obligation here is based on the teaching of Islam, the main religion of Iran. The construction of Zohreh as a person who needs help undermines her independence and reinforces her dependence on others.

Likewise Zahra is depicted as the object of pity because she is both disabled and a girl. Here, gender and disability intersect to position Zahra as the weak Other in the eyes of her teacher and classmates. Zahra said:

My teacher always say she takes pity on me because I am weak due to my disability, and being a girl makes me even weaker ... Some of classmates always take pity on me and help me. Such behaviours are very common in my village where people are caring. Some of my classmates are from the village I live in.

Zahra equates 'taking pity on' the disabled as 'caring', which is a common trait of people living in her village and her classmates. The traditional gendered discourse

of ‘women and girls as the weaker sex’ co-occurs with discourse of ‘disabled people as objects of pity’.

As illustrated in the preceding narratives, the participants subscribed to the traditional belief that education was not of primary concern to girls with disabilities. They do not have to earn their own living, because they know that their families will take care of them. What is more important is the survival of family members as a social unit with the men working for the benefit of all, growing crops and doing animal husbandry on the farm. The division of labour between rural men and women is clear: the farm is the domain of the male, the home that of the female.

### **Mobility and accessibility in school**

It is necessary that schooling is made available to people with disabilities in a form which is accessible, including access to the Principal’s office, the science laboratory, the library, the art class and the staffroom (Hastings 2015). Here we focus on the difficulty that the disabled students faced at school with respect to mobility and accessibility. Their narratives illustrate that they are disabled both by their impairment and disabling environments and practices.

Nida related her experience:

Once I get to my school yard I need to ask someone to lift me from my wheelchair and take me to the second floor. Sometimes, I miss my classes.

She represented her body as failing to overcome the physical deficit of reaching the second floor where her classes were held, because of the lack of facilities and services for the disabled at the school. Her experience highlights the difficulty that students like her face when they leave the security of their homes, which reinforces their vulnerability and dependency on others.

Another disabled student, Mary, also faced the same problem, but when she told her mother about it she received a gender biased response – namely to stay at home and help her mother. Mary said:

Once I complained about my situation at school and told my mother I cannot walk up stairs so quickly to come to the second floor where my class was. She told me you better stay at home and help me. Your education is not important, just go there this year and no need to continue school.

The narrative draws attention to the role of impairment and personal experience in Mary’s life. It exemplifies how the discourse of ‘inaccessibility to facilities for disabled people’ supports the traditional discourse that ‘education for girls is unimportant’, which affects the life of women living in rural areas. Without education, her opportunities for employment are effectively eliminated.

### **Discussion and implications**

Seen through a western lens, no subversive pro-women gendered discourses are produced in the informants’ narratives. This could be because gender stereotypes are rooted in rural areas in Iran. Their identities as rural girls with disabilities are linked to their experiences in different rural spaces, whether they are at home with their narratives revolving around family matters or at school when they come into contact with friends and other social actors including teachers and principals. The dominant

discourse is the discourse of disability, which seems to support the traditional notion of disability as a deficiency which is also disempowering.

Children with disability in rural Iran, especially girls, constitute a particularly vulnerable group who are unintentionally underrepresented in education. Although most are valued members of their families, they are less likely to receive much support for their education, because as expressed in the participants' discourse, unlike the boys, they are not expected to be the main provider.

When recounting their lives, all of the informants seemed to be resigned to the kind of life they face as someone with disability living in rural Iran. There is a quiet acceptance of their role in the family, which revolves around helping their mother in the house and doing the chores expected of them. This seems to agree with what St Pierre (2000, 485) says: 'once a discourse becomes "normal" and "natural" it is difficult to think and act outside it'. The non-resistant attitude towards their identity as a female member of the family with responsibility closely linked to the home could be attributed to the patriarchal nature of the society and the rural environment itself where the world of work is closely linked to the farm. Economics often becomes intertwined with gender roles. In impoverished families, the limited resources available will be used to educate the boys rather than the girls with the expectation that the boys will ultimately help support the family.

None of the participants are aware of how potentially important education is for them. Given that these children cannot do the physically demanding jobs essential for farming, education would give them the opportunity to do non-manual work and make them more independent. Empowering female children with disabilities through education could bring in new possibilities for them to experience a new type of femininity which subverts the discourse of 'men as breadwinners and women as caregivers' in line with pro-women feminist waves and movements.

'Inclusive' education recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination in mainstream schools with their peers using appropriate support within the school. The commitment to building more inclusive societies should result in improvements in the situation of children with disabilities. The lack of special facilities and services in the mainstream school in the rural areas illustrates how they are constrained by the learning and physical environments.

Findings from our analysis also suggest that disability and poverty are closely interlinked and families trapped in poverty are understandably under great stress. Along with working hard in the field to stay afloat economically, their families are struggling to deal with problems associated with disability, including negative attitudes, safety for their children, problems of mobility and access, and other extra costs related to caring for children with disabilities (e.g. medications, supplies and equipment and transportation). In this case, government support and assistance and the help and understanding of the whole community are indispensable. Among the issues that need to be addressed, and where interventions in terms of policy are necessary, are access, safety and security, and social integration.

The physical environment in rural areas can limit the possibilities for children with disabilities to enjoy the benefits of education. Those from poor families, especially girls, are more likely to drop out of school because of the difficulty caused by the lack of transport to and from a school far from home. When they reach school they face other disabling barriers involving access to the school building, and movement around recreation areas and the teaching and learning areas, including the classroom, the library and science laboratories. It is necessary to

remove these barriers so that the school environment facilitates access to facilities and encourages their participation alongside their peers. Ramps and wide doorways, for example, can improve access and safety, especially for those in wheelchairs. Disabled children educated alongside their peers have a much better chance of becoming productive members of their societies, and of being integrated into the lives of their communities. They face hardships to engage even in simple activities which non-disabled people take for granted. A policy to help children with disability to get to school and make school buildings more accessible could create a more supportive school environment to provide them with the physical safety and comfort necessary for learning.

Another issue is the safety and security of girls with disabilities when they are in school or even on the way to school. In this article we cited one incident of harassment in school involving a member of staff, but abuse could also come from parents, health professionals and others. According to Jones et al. (2012), children with disabilities are three times more likely to be abused than the non-disabled and should be viewed as a high-risk group, which makes it more critical to identify abuse against them. Recognized as among the most vulnerable members of society, they stand to benefit most from a safeguarding policy that protects them against abuse and guarantees access to justice, as they are less likely to receive an advocacy service. Positive actions and safeguarding interventions from the government can reduce the risk of abuse and make it possible for them to have an equal right to protection. More importantly, there should be a gender-sensitive policy on child protection, designed with girls' unique needs in mind. A support system managed by teachers with appropriate experience and expertise in child protection working in partnership with parents should be introduced in schools to promote well-being and look into child protection concerns. This will ensure that their concerns can be investigated promptly and immediate steps can be taken to protect children who are at immediate risk. A supportive environment also includes not only fostering understanding for children with disabilities among their peers and teachers, but also expressing concern appropriately and taking their perspective.

Like boys, disabled girls need education for practical reasons and to acquire knowledge to help them break out of the cycle of poverty. But education should go beyond this, and give them the opportunity to become visible, challenge prejudice and discrimination, and become contributing members of society. There should be a social inclusion policy not only to help them participate fully in life at school but to integrate into the mainstream of society. Real inclusion begins from their lived experiences as girls with disabilities, and challenges those in power to provide a meaningful place for them in the wider community. Girls with disabilities and their families can be provided with a sense of belonging by involving them in social support networks and in community life. The creation of a well-resourced community which provides disability support services and recreation will help the families and their children learn and grow, and help the children to reach their full potential.

## Conclusion

In this article we depict the coexistence of gender, rurality and disability in reproducing traditional gender beliefs and gendered work for women, suggested in the way the participants played down the role of education for them and emphasized the roles of the male members as breadwinners and the female members linked to

the domain of domesticity. This reflects a social situation in which the financial responsibility for the family falls entirely on the men, and this particular way of thinking may be more predominant in a rural area and in situations where women are made more vulnerable because of their disability.

Using Bryant and Pini's approach, we explore multiple experiences of rural girls, and the practice of patriarchy in rural Iran which shaped their life. An important point to bear in mind is the heterogeneity of these girls who are disabled. The examination of data in specific rural spaces at specific moments in time enables us to see how gender, rurality and disability intersect, and which is dominant. For example, disability and rurality are foregrounded and gender backgrounded when Nida related the difficulty faced in terms of accessibility, while in Mary's case we see the intersection of gender, rurality and disability with her mother telling her that it was not necessary for her to go to school because her family could support her, so education for her was not important. In Yasmin's case, both gender and disability intersect, and rurality is backgrounded, as she recounted her unpleasant experience of sexual harassment.

While our findings reveal some negative aspects of rurality in terms of education and disability, it is important to consider some empowering aspects of rural Iran for women with disabilities in general. The traditional discourses of rurality only count male bodies as farming bodies, with men taking centre-stage on the land and women having no involvement in physical on-farm work, which is perhaps ideal for someone with a disability. This concurs with Little's (1997) findings from interviews conducted with women from rural areas, which foregrounded the gendered nature of the rural space with the emphasis on home and community, and reinforces traditional gender roles with women confined to a domestic role.

From a western perspective, girls with disabilities in rural Iran are seen to be at a disadvantage compared with their urban counterparts. The double-reading of the data with a focus on the cultural and social context of rural Iran could reveal some positive aspects of rurality for such people. In close-knit rural families, the provision of financial support to female family members is part of their way of life, which gives them a sense of security. Female family members are traditionally considered the *Namoos* of males, translated as the honour of a man. It is not surprising that when asked what would happen to them if their parents passed away, without much hesitation all participants said their brothers and sisters would take care of them. This gives them the assurance that their fathers and brothers will protect them from harm. However, in urban Iran this concept is fading fast and urban men are not as protective of their women as rural men.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will raise the awareness of policy-makers who may unintentionally neglect the many formidable obstacles that keep girls with disabilities from achieving their full potential in education. This awareness may encourage policy-makers to take the necessary steps to improve access to education for girls with disabilities in rural areas and make them part of the wider community. Although the conditions in rural Iran may suggest that education is not necessary for girls, especially those with disabilities, it is crucial to get across to parents the value of education from a wider perspective, including the possibility that educated girls have the potential to tap new sources of income for the family. To achieve this goal in Iran, it is necessary that academic researchers share their findings and work closely with policy-makers and other relevant Iranian authorities to redouble their efforts and provide for the needs of girls with disabilities.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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