



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

“Every human being is gifted with talents and different abilities”

Experiences of Women Leaders with Disabilities
in Organizations of Persons with Disabilities in Africa

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Abstract:

The rights of persons with disabilities have been considered in international agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the United Nations Agenda 2030 goals, and through these, disability has become a cross-cutting theme in development cooperation. Despite these advances, the link between disability and development has so far received little attention in development studies. Intersectional research on the experiences of women with disabilities in Africa is limited, and when focusing on the experiences of women with disabilities as leaders, even less research is available. This thesis aims to explore the 1) resources and 2) challenges experienced by women leaders with disabilities in their work.

The importance of researching the leadership of women with disabilities is further emphasized given the gendered and ableist stereotypes associated with women with disabilities' leadership and the marginalization of women with disabilities' voices in social discourse. Furthermore, research on leadership in the African context is limited and Western leadership research is not directly applicable to African leadership. A better understanding of the experiences of African women leaders with disabilities has the potential to inform the needs of the wider disability community and promote more equal inclusion of people with disabilities.

This thesis explores the leadership experiences of women leaders with disabilities, drawing on decolonial theory, critical disability studies and intersectional feminism. The methodology used in data collection is qualitative semi-structured remote interviews with 8 women leaders from African Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). The data has been analyzed according to the principles of content analysis. The data revealed following resources: 1) self-esteem, ubuntu and servant leadership 2) support, mentors, role models and networks and 3) education and training. Challenges related to the leadership of women with disabilities were following: 1) gender-based violence and patriarchal structures 2) shortcoming in organizational level 3) socio-economic environment at home 4) competition, lack of accessibility and support and 5) ableism. This study shows that women leaders with disabilities have many resources at their disposal, but they also face many challenges in leadership and in society at large. The study contributes to a much-needed debate on the rights of women with disabilities to inclusion and, above all, on the need to elevate them equally into positions of power and decision-making.

ADF	African Disability Forum
AU	African Union
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DPO	Disabled People's organisations
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OPD	Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
PWD	Persons with disabilities
PAFOD	Pan African Federation of Disabled
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
WWD	Women with disabilities

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1 Introduction

The intersection of the global development studies and disability studies has attracted little attention in academic world (Black & Stienstra, 2016; Katsui, 2023). Although the rights of people with disabilities have become a more visible part of the development discourse over the last years, the recognition of the expertise, knowledge and agency of persons with disabilities is still often inadequate (Wickenden et al., 2022; Hartblay, 2020). Furthermore, academic literature has argued that the challenges and strengths experienced by persons with disabilities should be addressed as part of all development thinking and programming, and therefore disability mainstreaming in international cooperation would be essential (Wickenden et al., 2022; Katsui & Mojitahedi, 2015). An estimated 16% of people in the world have a disability and 80% of them live in the Global South (WHO, 2022). Research on disability in the African context is essential, as it is estimated that 60-80 million Africans live with some form of disability and this number is expected to increase (Disabled World, 2024). United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) raises the importance of improving disability rights as a cross-cutting theme. Agenda 2030 also raises the empowerment of women and gender equality as one of its goals. It highlights that improving the status of women contributes development and economic growth (UN, 2015).¹ Furthermore, higher proportion of women in leadership positions contributes to gender equality. While focus on gender and women's rights has been prominent in international development discourse and projects since the 1970s, through Women in Development (WID) approach (Kabeer, 1994; Parpart, 2002), it is only in the 2000s that disability issues have received more attention in development discourse (Snyder et al., 1996; Wickenden et al., 2022). For example, people with disabilities were not included in the Millenium Development Goals (Ghai, 2009), but in the SDG Agenda 2030 there are 17 references to people with disabilities and inclusion (UN, 2015).

¹ It is worth noting that development studies are not uncritical of the classic economic growth (Obeng-Odoom, 2018) or development (Kopf, 2022), even though these concepts often play a central role in international discourse. The concept of development can be approached in different ways (ibid), and the Western interpretation of development has been criticized. According to Escobar (1995, 5-6) development should be seen as a discourse produced in a historical context. Development can be seen as an evolution of values, ideas and theories, involving various successful and unsuccessful interventions (Escobar 1995, 154). However, development as a concept is deeply rooted in the Western habit and state of being and has historically accumulated a conceptual power that is widely acknowledged as a part of social and political action (Koponen 2020).

However, intersectional research on women with disabilities in the context of Africa is still limited. Katsui and Mojtahedi (2015) have explored the intersection of disability and gender through the experiences of Ethiopian women with disabilities. Tuomi et al. (2015) have studied Tanzanian women with disabilities and their experiences of progressing to higher education. Hanass-Hancock et al. (2020) has written on the capacity of NGOs and OPDs to address violence experienced by women with disabilities in Botswana. Ganle et al. (2020) have conducted a study on the aspirations and motivations of Ghanaian women with disabilities to have children. Mesiäislehto (2024) has written about the experiences of Tanzanian girls in relation to access to sexual and reproductive rights. When the focus is narrowed down to the leadership of women with disabilities in the African context, even less research can be found on this issue. On the leadership of women with disabilities in the African context, see King et al. (2023a, 2023b) and Majiet & Africa (2015). There is a significant gap in research on the leadership of women with disabilities in the African context, particularly in organizational settings.

1.1 Background of the research

Disability is a subject that touches everyone in some way. Anyone can become disabled at any time and most people experience some form of disability temporary or at the old age (WHO, 2011, 3). However, the likelihood of becoming disabled increases if you belong to one or more marginalized groups (Ghai, 2009). 10-20% of the total African population has a disability (Disabled World, 2024). Disability is often linked to mechanisms of unequal oppression. For instance, wars, unsafe working conditions, malnutrition, environmental disasters, humanitarian emergencies, environmental pollution and emissions, conflicts and post conflict trauma have caused and continue to cause injury and disability (Grech, 2012; Meekosha, 2011; Kett et al., 2009; Mitra et al., 2013). Particularly, disability and poverty are intertwined phenomena, in other words, poverty causes disability and disability causes poverty (Yeo & Moore, 2003). According to Banks et al. (2017) failure to address the link between disability and poverty will have direct consequences for the achievement of the SDGs. As poverty is a phenomenon that cuts

across both development studies and disability studies, and as the prevalence of disability is high in the Global South, dialogue and epistemological encounters between the two disciplines are essential (Stein, 2013; Grech, 2012; McEwan & Butler, 2007). While it is essential to recognize the link between poverty and disability, there is a risk that in development discourses and international debates, disability is mainly associated with the fight against poverty. This can result in a hierarchy where poverty must be alleviated first to promote other rights. (see Berghs, 2014, 28.) Disability is then seen as an economic "problem" that can be addressed through humanitarian aid, and this in turn maintains a discourse in which persons with disabilities are not seen as having agency but are seen as dependent on the help of others (Berghs, 2014, 28; Chataika, 2012, 255). Instead, it would be important to deconstruct the meanings of the "ability" and to examine the historical structures and power relations associated with the norm of ability (see Jenkins, 2021).

Researchers have highlighted gaps in the representation and participation of people with disabilities in development field, both in academia and development cooperation. Yeo and Moore (2003) state that people with disabilities are excluded from development research and development organizations. Stein (2013) makes a similar observation by claiming that people with disabilities have long been excluded from development aid and cooperation. According to Kett et al. (2009), insufficient attention and resources have been directed towards ensuring the representation and participation of people with disabilities in development field. This lack of attention is precisely the result of poverty, discrimination, and lack of opportunities for participation. Although disability mainstreaming has been insufficient, one step forward appears to be the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)² (Kett et al., 2009), which has brought the rights of people with disabilities increasingly to the attention of development actors and policy makers (Kett et al., 2009; Stein, 2013; Manning et al., 2016).

² The UN CRPD is the first comprehensive human rights treaty of the 21st century. It was adopted in December 2006 at UN Headquarters in New York and opened for signature in March 2007. The Convention entered into force on 3 May 2008. At the core of the Convention is the social dimensions and the idea that all persons with disabilities should enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms (UN, 2024).

The CRPD also signals a significant paradigm shift in approaches and attitudes that can support the implementation of accessibility and inclusion in the international context (see Mwendwa et al. 2009, 663; Manning et al. 2016). However, implementing the CRPD requires strengthening the capacity of Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)³ and systematic cooperation between OPDs and national human rights institutions (Mahomed et al., 2019). The inclusion of people with disabilities in development cooperation is crucial, as their exclusion not only has a negative impact on the human rights of persons with disabilities, but also on the well-being and livelihoods of families and communities more broadly (Mwendwa 2009, 665). For example, a family member's disability affects the whole family, as a person with disability may need medical care, assistive devices and/or assistance with daily activities from family members (Chadambuka et al., 2024; UN Women, 2020, 6). Furthermore, the exclusion of people with disabilities from development strategies leads to a loss of productive potential and income for persons with disabilities and their families (Mwendwa 2009, 665). This study aims to address the lack of knowledge on disability in global development studies, to provide insights into the intersection of disability and development and, more specifically, the role of women leaders with disabilities as actors in OPDs as part of a broader development discourse.

When discussing sustainable development in African communities, women play a crucial role economically (Wekwete, 2014; Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014), politically (Gaynor 2022, 1), socially (Nam 2021), and environmentally (Masinga et al., 2021). It is also important to note the heterogeneity of African women and how intersections such as class, disability, gender, ethnicity, and religion have long defined and shaped the role of African women in society and politics (Pikramenou & Mahajan, 2019).

³ When talking about an Organization of Persons with Disabilities, parallel abbreviations DPO (Disabled People's Organisation) and OPD (Organizations of Persons with Disabilities) are often used. In this thesis, I prefer the abbreviation of OPD. This supports the idea that it is good to use a person-first language, which is more inclusive (Kiwana, 2022). Through it, attention is primarily directed to the person, not on the disability. For the same reason I use the expression "women with disabilities" instead of disabled women.

Giving a voice to the experiences of women leaders with disabilities can be seen as a pathway to sustainability. As Agyeman (2008) points out, in recent years it has become increasingly evident that environmental issues are inextricably linked to human equality. In other words, sustainability cannot be achieved unless it is approached in a way that considers both environmental and social justice concerns (ibid.). It is crucial to learn about the experiences of women leaders with disabilities in Africa, as there is a lack of research on this topic in general, but also in the field of global development studies. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the lived experiences of women with disabilities in leadership positions in organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs) in Africa.

1.2 Research Question and objective of the research

The experiences of women with disabilities in relation to leadership in OPDs is a topic that has received little attention in research. Women with disabilities often experience overlapping marginalization, which can lead to challenges in career development and working life. Moreover, their strengths, challenges and experiences are not sufficiently documented (see Majiet & Africa, 2015). Kudlick (2003) notes that as disability is human essence comparable to gender and race, it is curious that historians have not paid attention to disability earlier. Examining leadership experiences of women with disabilities is particularly important because there are many ableist (Procknow et al., 2017) and gendered stereotypes associated with leadership (Gipson et al., 2017). Leadership is traditionally associated with qualities associated with masculinity, such as confidence, control, determination, diligence and assertiveness (see Titi Amayah & Haque 2017, 102; Schein, 1973; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). These qualities, on the other hand, are less often associated with women with disabilities (see Majiet & Africa, 2015; Pikramenou & Mahajan, 2019.)

Another fundamental problem is hierarchical power relations. Different actors may have different epistemologies, which they live but are not necessarily aware of (Kopf, 2022). Global North actors working on development and humanitarian aid in African countries may have very different conceptions of development compared to local Africans who are actively working to improve their own lives and those of their

communities, but do not necessarily call it development (ibid). According to Titi Amayah & Haque (2017) Global North dominates the debate on leadership and the voices of women leaders in the Global South and especially Africa have been neglected. There is a lack of reporting and research on disability leadership, particularly in the African context (King et al., 2023a). In many African countries, women with disabilities are likely to experience discrimination, hostile attitudes, and stigma. Women with disabilities in leadership positions within the disability movement have an important role to play in combating discrimination. One way of dismantling these harmful attitudes is to provide more access to leadership positions to women with disabilities within the disability movement (ibid).

A key enabler for this thesis is the internship I did at the African Disability Forum (ADF) in 2022, with the financial support of the Abilis Foundation. ADF together with Abilis Foundation enabled networking with women leaders with disabilities and the suggestion to research this topic came directly from the need of the ADF.

Disability research has traditionally focused on examining intergroup relations, for example how the experiences of persons with and without disabilities differ (Wallace et al., 2018). Hence, research of intra-group relations has gained less attention (ibid). This study responds to this need by providing information, also on intra-group relations within the disability community, in this case, within OPDs. The core task of this study is to search for answers to following key research questions:

- a) What are the resources of women with disabilities in leadership positions at ODPs in Africa?
- b) What are the challenges that women with disabilities in leadership positions at ODPs in Africa experience?

2 Previous Research and Theoretical Framework

I begin this chapter by introducing the key concepts that are central to the study. I will then discuss previous research. In subchapter 2.2, I address the factors related to the intersectional position of people with disabilities. In subchapter 2.3, I elaborate on indigenous knowledge and Afrocentric leadership. In subchapter 2.4 I discuss women's leadership in organizational setting. In subchapter 2.5 I summarize the history of disability in the African context. I conclude this chapter in subchapter 2.6. where I present the theoretical framework of the study.

2.1 Defining the key concepts

There is a debate about language and its meanings in development studies (Koponen 2020), feminist research tradition (Smith & Mueller 2022, 52), and disability studies (Cascio et al. 2021). Paying attention to inclusive terminology is one way to strengthen the ethics of research (Cascio et al. 2021). In this subchapter, I define the key concepts relevant to this research, while acknowledging that there is not always consensus on the definition of concepts and terminology, even within minority communities, and that language is constantly changing and being redefined (see Grue 2015, 7-12; Smith & Mueller, 2022, 52).

2.1.1 Conceptualizing disability

Disability is a broad and complex concept, and its definition is influenced by where experiences of disability are located, by whom and from what position of power it is defined, and from what geographical and cultural context (Hunt et al., 2021, 6; Chataika, 2012, 253). While the complexity of defining disability is primarily related to the broadness of the concept and its multi-factorial and scalar nature, theorizing the concept is essential both in academia and in practice (Vehmas & Shakespeare, 2014). Disability can be categorized by both type and degree. Disability can be physical, mental, psycho-social or sensory, or a combination of these. The degree of disability may be mild, profound or something in between (Loeb, 2013,

308). Disability language is used in different ways depending on individual identity. It is therefore important to respect the fact that members of the disability community have different views about terminology (Smith & Mueller, 2022, 52). In this study, I use the CRPD's definition of disability as a starting point, which is as follows:

“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” (CRPD, 2006, Article 1, p. 4.)

The medical model of disability has a long history and a well-established position, which has been influenced by the power and status of the medical profession (Smart & Smart 2006, 30). The medical model sees disability first and foremost as an individual experience and defines it in the language of medicine (ibid). The medical model sees disability as an undesirable deficiency (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019, 204). It views disability from a medical perspective, with an emphasis on the identification of mental, physical, or sensory impairments and the medical rehabilitation and treatment of these impairments towards so-called “normal” functioning (Cobley, 2023). The medical model has had a strong influence on official definitions of disability, such as the WHO's 1970 definition of disability, which was widely criticized by disability activists and has since changed. (Cobley, 2023; Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

The social model emerged as an alternative way of looking at disability. The social model has its roots in British disability movement, and it was born primarily out of dissatisfaction with the medical model (Cobley, 2023). With the social model, disability is understood first and foremost as a socially and politically constructed phenomenon and not as a personal misfortune. Disability studies based on such thinking encourages to take a closer look at historical processes in which power and oppression have been managed in different contexts. Disability studies can also identify common elements with queer studies, gender studies, race studies and post-colonial studies. It is closely related to identity studies and can look at social constructs of marginality and normality and, for example, how identity relates to the body and mind (Jin, 2022). Dirth and Adams (2019, 269) see that the social model offers several analytical paths to securing equal rights for people with disabilities, but

its weakness is that it does not really challenge the neoliberal individualist understanding of action. Authors see the social model as focusing on securing the rights of people with disabilities within existing hegemonic systems rather than actively seeking to dismantle these hegemonic structures in which ways of being are predetermined (Dirth & Adams, 2019, 269).

This study examines disability through critical disability studies. I explain the concept of critical disability studies in more detail in the chapter 2.3.3. My own view on disability is that different theorizations of disability offer different emphases on the issue, and one is not necessarily better than the other. As a member of the queer community myself, I find critical disability theory to be a natural way of looking at disability, as this orientation is central to the dismantling of various binarities and norms, which is also central to the queer community and identities (see Chisale, 2022, 10).

Disability research can be criticized for its focus on the Global North, while the experiences of persons with disabilities in the Global South have received less attention. Xuan Thuy Nguyen (2023, 109) finds it problematic that the disability discourse of the Global North implicitly assumes that persons with disabilities in different nation-states and transnational spaces have similar experiences. For example, in the African context, albinism is increasingly seen as a form of disability, whereas in the Western context it is seen more as a congenital condition that may have certain limitations but does not carry the same stigma as in many African countries (see Franklin et al., 2018). In sub-Saharan Africa, where albinism is widespread, there are many prejudices, myths and beliefs associated with albinism that prevent their full participation in society (Brocco, 2016). Instead of blaming African societies for discrimination against persons with disabilities, it would be essential to understand the causal links between colonialism and discrimination against persons with disabilities (Power, 2001).⁴ Gbodossou (2015, 67-68) notes that in the West African tradition, countries such as Senegal and Benin did not originally have the term *handicap*, but the term was imported from outside Africa. According to Gbodossou (2015, 67–68), the word has an objectifying connotation to it, which is in

⁴ I discuss this in more detail in section 2.5. where I discuss the history of disability in Africa.

contradiction with the African way of thinking. In addition to the geographical, historical and cultural context of disability, it would also be important to be aware of the unequal power relations between the global North and South, for example in terms of where research is conducted geographically and about whom. Kiwan (2022) sees a problem with the current situation where disability has been studied mainly in the Global North or disability in the Global South has been studied by researchers in the Global North.⁵ The author remarks that this setting reproduces a form of post-colonial empire, where knowledge is imposed and appropriated in different contexts as form of a biopower (Kiwan, 2022). Therefore, a decolonial approach is necessary when conceptualizing the disability.

2.1.2 Conceptualizing gender

As “woman” is a central concept in my research question, I want to be as transparent as possible about what I mean by it. When I talk about women in this thesis, I mainly mean women who identify themselves in this category. However, it is good to be aware of the problem of binary gender categories and the fact that within these categories there is a wide spectrum of different gender identities.⁶ The term sex is used when talking about biological differences between people, and in a binary world has typically referred to men and women. The concept of gender on the other hand refers to the socially and culturally constructed differences between people in the male and female categories, rather than biological differences. There are many gender identities other than male and female, such as non-binary people, Hijras, Fa’afafine and Two-Spirit people. The term gender is also used more broadly to describe a range of identities that do not conform to established notions of male and female (Oakley, 2016). Biological sex and social gender can have different meanings in different cultures and communities. For example, in the Nandi tribe in Kenya, there are so-called “female husbands”, who are biologically female but socially male

⁵ I am aware that the same problematic setting applies to this study and therefore I will explain my position further in chapter 3.2.2.

⁶ Because most of the world uses a binary gender division, statistics and studies on gender differences are often based on legal categories of male and female, which in turn ignore the various identities of individuals. However, within the female and male categories, individual experiences of gender are diverse. When I talk about women, I am aware that the category is a product of binary thinking that serves a juridical and medical thinking, but within the category, there are also other gender identities.

(Palacios-Huerta, 2022). It is important to recognize gender diversity when discussing women with disabilities, as Western medicine's approach to both intersex and disability shares similar ableist characteristics (Holmes 2008). However, in the context of humanitarian aid and development cooperation, the word gender is often used as a synonym for women and girls, although the term gender includes men, women and other identities that exist outside the binary division (Van Dijkhorst & Vonhof 2005, 7).

The term cisgender can be used to describe a person with male or female genitalia (sex) from birth to adulthood, whose gender expression is typical of the social group male or female (sex) in which the person is classified at birth. In other words, a cisgender person's gender is on the same side as their sex assigned at birth, while a transgender person's gender is on the other side (trans) of their sex assigned at birth or something outside/between binary division. It is good to be aware that the terms man and woman without the cis prefix, perpetuate, normalise and reinforce the idea of cisgender as a natural characteristic. In contrast, the labels 'cis man' or 'cis woman' alongside 'trans man' and 'trans woman' deconstruct this normalised language (see Aultman 2014). Richardson-Self (2022) stresses that it is not about erasing the identities of "man" and "woman" or moving beyond them, but rather about looking critically at language and our actions to create new meanings. Explicitly adopting the term 'cis' as opposed to 'trans' challenges the dominant social reality and opens alternative routes of entry for those whose identities are otherwise left outside the discourse. I have made a conscious choice to talk about women in this study because in the binary world and in legal language, man and woman are concepts in use and much of the research on women with disabilities looks at gender in a binary setting. However, I want to highlight the lack of inclusion of trans women, intersex and non-binary people in feminist disability studies (see Timmons 2020).

Mohlabane and Tshoedi (2022) write about womanhood from an African feminist decolonial perspective, specifying that the concept of "woman" is defined biologically and hierarchically in opposition to "man" and is thus a Eurocentric and colonial construct. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand the link between colonialism and violent masculinity, as many African men face difficulties in a post-colonial, neoliberal and often uncertain environment (see Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). According to Ammann and Staudacher (2021), masculinity is a complex and diverse

set of social practices and experiences, sometimes involving contradicted elements. According to authors, masculinity is not a fixed and permanent identity, but is in constant flux, and the ideas, practices and experiences associated with it are negotiated between different actors and change over time and space. Ammann and Staudacher (2021) argue that as with other debates in the African context, the discourse on masculinity in knowledge production highlights inequalities and power imbalances between so called global North and global South. While Europe and North America are seen as the centre of academic knowledge production, Africa is seen as its periphery (Ammann and Staudacher, 2021). Pumla Dineo Gqola (2007) discusses the connection between violent masculinity and gendered violence. According to Gqola (2007), principles of slavery and colonialism included violence, oppression and abuse, and the definition of whose life was valuable and whose was not. This was accompanied by the denial of human rights, the breaking up of families and the entrenchment of self-hatred. Self-defence in the face of colonisation led to centuries of warfare across the African continent (Gqola, 2007, 113). Furthermore, Schulz & Janson (2016) point out that the colonial legacy and its associated institutions and stereotypes perpetuate contemporary masculinity practices in Africa.

2.2 Women with disabilities

There is evidence that disability is more prevalent in women than men. The study, which was conducted in 15 African, Asian and South American countries, revealed that women with disabilities outnumber men with disabilities (Mitra et al., 2013). Women with disabilities often experience exclusion, prejudice and rejection in their families and communities, gender discrimination, challenges especially when living in rural areas and lack of support in leadership positions (Majiet & Africa 2015). Social stigma can be more complex for women with disabilities, as women often face more complex tensions related social relations, for example the idea of nuclear family as the center of social provision (Power 2001). In the media, women with disabilities are often portrayed as weak and in need of constant support, which is reflected in the general culture and attitudes, and this in turn can have a negative impact on their self-esteem (Majiet & Africa, 2015). Patriarchal structures in society have a negative impact not only on women but also on other genders, such as intersex and

transgender people, as well as men who do not meet the ideals of a white, masculine and able-bodied heterosexual male (see Ortner 2022). According to Ortner (2022), patriarchy is more than just “sexism”, as it manifests itself in complex intersections with other forms of power and thus patriarchy cannot be separated from white supremacy, normative able-bodiedness and normative heterosexuality.

Attention should also be paid to the factors affecting the career development of women with disabilities. There is evidence that education is a contributing factor (King et al. 2023a). Children with disabilities are often excluded from school or the schools they attend are not inclusive, leaving many children with disabilities behind. This also affects opportunities for further education and employment (Mitra et al. 2013; Male & Wodon, 2017). Access to education for women with disabilities varies and inequalities may be more pronounced for women living in rural areas, compared to urban ones. People living in rural areas often experience poverty and may have difficulty paying school fees. However, these shortcomings can be addressed, for example through targeted policy measures. One example can be found in Uganda, where the government targeted finances to universities to provide enrolment of people with disabilities. As a result, people with disabilities were more likely to receive a degree compared to neighboring countries (Simbaya et al., 2019). However, global statistics and data shows that women with disabilities are three times more likely to be illiterate, twice as likely to be employed and twice as likely to be in leadership positions compared to men without disabilities (UN 2018, 7). On the other hand, there is controversial evidence on the combined impact of gender and disability on employment. For example, Mizunoya and Mitra (2013) have analysed the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities in 15 developing countries, including Sub Saharan Africa. The results of this study suggest that for women, disability is not necessarily as significant a barrier to employment as it is for men. Analysis of the determinants of employment probability by disability and gender provides evidence that women with disabilities have similar employment rates to women without disabilities in many countries of the Sub-Saharan Africa. For men, on the other hand, disability is negatively associated with employment. This would suggest that the barriers to employment for women with disabilities may be primarily related to gender. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, for every 100 boys of primary school age in sub-Saharan Africa, 123 girls are left out of education.

The exclusion of girls is particularly pronounced in lower and upper secondary education. In the nine lowest-income countries, girls from the poorest families spend on average two years less in school than boys (UNESCO 2023, 25).

The educational background of women with disabilities affects their chances of progressing to leadership positions. On the other hand, education is also an avenue to legitimize one's own qualifications for leadership, through which a woman can convince others of their competence (King et al., 2023a). It therefore appears that the career paths and leadership experiences of women with disabilities are intertwined with a variety of factors ranging from self-confidence to perceived prejudice, the influence of patriarchy, education and socio-economic status more broadly. Lack of education for women with disabilities, on the other hand, can contribute to the accumulation of other factors affecting well-being and opportunities for participation. A study conducted in South Africa interviewing women with physical disabilities revealed many shortcomings in the situation of women with disabilities. Women stressed the importance of improving opportunities for education and employment and they hope for economic independence. Relying on assistance of others makes them vulnerable for different forms of exploitation and violence (Hartmann et al., 2022, 6). Katsui and Mojtabehi (2015) interviewed Ethiopian women with disabilities and found that the intersection of gender and disability can limit opportunities for education and employment and negatively affect the development of self-image. As Katsui and Mojtabehi (2015) underline, women with disabilities should be included as a significant part of development work in order to improve equality. This would allow women with disabilities to have role models, provide peer support to each other and, in the long-term, change the structures of society to be more inclusive.

In the light of the above-mentioned studies, the lack of education of women with disabilities is often linked other forms of oppression. In addition to the stigma, stereotypes and prejudices associated with disability in general, the intersection of disability and gender makes women with disabilities particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence (Mesiäislehto, 2024; Meer & Combrinck, 2015). According to a study by Jones et al. (2021), Ethiopian adolescents with disabilities are more vulnerable to gender and age-based violence and experience more psychosocial distress than their peers without disabilities. Instead, women without disabilities are

better positioned compared to women with disabilities and are not as exposed to sexual violence as much as women with disabilities (UN 2018,7). According to UN (1993) General Assembly gender-based violence “results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

The intersectional position of women with disabilities can also make it more challenging to identify the causes of discrimination. Banks and Mona (2007) have conducted research in the American context on the effects of multiple overlapping identities on leadership. The authors focus on the complex interplay between gender, disability and leadership in relation to each other through online discussions. The online discussions were initiated by the American Psychological Association's Society for the Psychology of Women. Participants in the online discussions reported how they were not always able to identify which social identities influenced their self-image and others' perceptions of them as leaders. One problem is that leadership is often defined from the outside, and a woman with disabilities is not considered a leader until someone else defines her as such. The online discussions also highlighted the internal and external group dynamics at disability conferences. In practice, people without visible disabilities are often treated in the same way as people without disabilities until they disclose their disability to others. The discussions also highlighted that the type of disability has an impact on leadership potential. Hierarchical orders can be observed between different disability groups and also according to whether one is disabled from birth or disabled throughout life. According to a study by Banks and Mona (2007), physical disability is seen as a more legitimate type of disability than intellectual or mental disability. Similarly, the study also found that lifetime disability is considered more significant than disability that occurs during life (Banks & Mona 2007, 333-334).

2.3 Indigenous knowledge and Afro-centric leadership

There is limited literature and research on leadership in a non-Western context, even though a significant number of studies have been published on women's leadership in the Western context (Titi Amayah & Haque 2017). It is important to note that

Western leadership studies and Western conceptions of leadership are not universal and cannot be applied unambiguously and broadly to the research of leadership in Africa (Jallow, 2014; Blunt & Jones 1997; Bolden & Kirk, 2009). While leadership in Africa shares many similarities with leadership in other regions of the world, there are many cultural and contextual factors associated with leadership in African countries that influence the construction and implementation of leadership (Bolden & Kirk 2009). According to Ndlovu (2015, 28), leadership should be studied and examined from a historical, cultural and contextual perspective to understand why and how the leadership and behavior of the subjects is constructed. From a broader historical perspective, the history of African countries differs from that of Western countries (Makhutla et al. 2021, 161). In many African countries, the impact of colonialism, oppression, poverty, corruption, civil unrest and the uncertainty of socio-economic opportunities affect governance, making the challenges involved different from those in other regions (ibid). Furthermore, it would be essential to promote a more constructivist approach to highlighting Afro-centric leadership and management knowledge (ibid). According to Bolden and Kirk (2009), a shift to a more Afrocentric vision of leadership requires reconnecting with the African "indigenous consciousness", centred on solidarity and interdependence.

Chisale (2022) has written on the theology of African women in relation to disability and ubuntu. Ubuntu is a cultural practice and concept with values of solidarity, spirit, survival, compassion, respect and dignity (Mbigi 1997, referenced from Ndlovu 2015, 152-153). The rejection of divisions is also central to Ubuntu's ethics, since Ubuntu's philosophy involves the fostering of human relations and solidarity, and a corresponding rejection of injustice, exclusion, inequality and subjugation (Chisale 2022). The ubuntu approach to community development emphasizes participatory approaches, community-based decision-making, consultation and collaboration (Ndlovu 2015, 153). According to Chisale (2022, 10), ubuntu values highlight the idea of the collective struggle of the body and the creation of alternative communities. In other words, African women with disabilities are united not only by a common human dignity and equal ontological position, but also by a common oppression. The shared experience of oppression and discrimination evokes the need for an alternative community where all enjoy equal justice at all levels (Chisale, 2022). The study by King et al. (2023b) revealed that African women leaders with disabilities can

draw on their experiences of trauma and struggle to adopt a leadership style that draws on the values of ubuntu thinking to bring effective change for people with disabilities.

Ngunjiri (2016) addresses the spirituality of African women but approaches the topic in relation to leadership. According to Ngunjiri (2016), leadership that draws strength from spirituality and ubuntu values holds great potential for achieving social justice goals, especially the empowerment of women, girls and the poor. Naude (2019) discusses on the decolonization of Western knowledge and the role that African indigenous ethics, as reflected in the ubuntu, can contribute to this aspiration. According to Naude (2019), ubuntu has the potential to deconstruct Eurocentric views and mitigate the effects of colonialism. Moreover, ubuntu values as an alternative moral theory offer Africa-centred indigenous knowledge and this decolonisation process can produce ethical theories with better problem-solving and alternative ways of articulation, leading to new paradigms of knowledge.

Ubuntu approach has many similarities with servant leadership (Ngunjiri, 2016). In academic literature, servant leadership can be defined in different ways. Maggie Madimbo (2016, 17-108) articulates servant leadership through eight sub-themes specific to this leadership style: (a) leadership as service, (b) servant leadership through serving family, (c) listening, (d) stewardship, (e) resourceful problem solving, (f) authenticity, (g) leadership as making a difference, and (h) community building. Sendjaya et al. (2008) consider the concept of servant leadership as a holistic whole, including dimensions such as follower-centeredness, spirituality, moral and servant leadership. According to the authors, there is a great need for these dimensions in an organizational context (Sendjaya et al. 2008).

There are many barriers to leadership for African women with disabilities, from the background factors that influence career paths to the prevailing patriarchal and ableist structures and attitudes in society. However, it is also essential to recognise the specificities of Afrocentric leadership and the agency of women with disabilities to influence wider society and communities. Filomina Chioma Steady (2011) has researched the leadership experiences of West African women leaders from an indigenous perspective. Steady's research consists of interviews and group

discussions with women leaders from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Steady's interviews revealed that women leaders see women's leadership as an important factor in promoting equality, democracy and peace (Steady 2011, 237). In addition to these, a key issue that emerged from the interviews was the perception that there is a strong link between motherhood and leadership. 'Mothering the nation' was seen as a key counterforce to patri-centric male leadership, which can have a tendency towards authoritarian leadership, warfare and one-party systems. In contrast, matri-centric leadership was associated with humanistic values such as care, healing, compassion, nurturing, social and economic development and peace. Steady (2011) describe this as an indigenous type of African feminism. According to Steady, this approach differs from the mainstream Western feminist discourse which sees motherhood as an obstacle to leadership (Steady 2011, 217-2023).

Steady (2011, 5) sees that theories of leadership are confined to Western, industrial and patriarchal views that emphasize the business world and organisations. Patriarchy and years of oppression have created negative belief systems and affected the self-confidence of many women (Gipson et al., 2017). Applying for leadership positions can feel difficult and there may be a false belief about their own ability to take on leadership roles (Gipson et al., 2017; Pikramenou & Mahajan, 2019). Instead, cultural norms, practices and patriarchal views suggest that women's place is at home, not in a leadership position or public sector (Pikramenou & Mahajan, 2019). A study in Zimbabwe found that patriarchal structures limit the possibilities of women with disabilities to participate in leadership roles in OPDs (Majiet & Africa, 2015).

2.4 Women leaders in organizational setting

Since the available academic research on the leadership of WWD in OPDs in the context of Africa is limited, in this subsection I present studies that have focused on either women's leadership or the leadership of PWD in Africa.

Perceptions and attitudes towards leadership in Africa have been addressed by Titi Amayah and Haque (2017) and Sundström and Stockemer (2022). Titi Amayah and Haque (2017) examined articles about African women leaders published in print

media in sub-Saharan Africa. Using content analysis of newspaper articles, the role of women leaders in the sub-Saharan context was examined. The study shows that in many sub-Saharan African countries, patriarchal societies have a strong influence and gender stereotypes are prevalent, such as that men are better leaders. Sundström and Stockemer (2022) conducted a study in African context to examine interviewees' thoughts on how well a woman would be suitable as a political leadership role. The study shows that the gender of the interviewer influences the opinions expressed by men and women about women's suitability for political leadership, and these effects appear to be fairly homogeneous across the African continent. Study results also show that men responded more often in a socially desirable way. Snyder et al. (1996) identifies factors that can help improve the effectiveness of gender-responsive policies in developing countries. One issue that the authors highlight is strong leadership as a voice for women's interests. Gender policy recognizes that the blurring of gender in the design, implementation and evaluation of development projects undermines the realization of women's rights.

The African Union Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for 2018-2028 has defined four pillars, which are: 1) Maximizing opportunities, outcomes and E-TECH dividends, 2) Dignity, security and resilience, 3) Effective laws, policies and institutions and 4) Leadership, voice and visibility (AU 2018, 19). The strategy aims to set out a pathway for achieving the African Union's Agenda 2063, of which the promotion of gender equality is a key component. The strategy states that women should have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making at all levels and should be equally represented in leadership positions (ibid, 49). Higher proportion of women in leadership positions also contributes to gender equality. Studies show that companies with women in leadership roles are more successful financially (Moodley et al. 2016, 3). Addition to this, Johansson and Wickström (2023) argue that in an organisational culture where whiteness, able-bodiedness and male gender are prominent features, individuals who are defined as 'other' can possess ethical sensitivities and thus contribute to organisational change.

The inequality experienced by women in accessing and succeeding in leadership positions is a global problem (Steady 2011, 8). The study conducted by Amakye et al. (2022) explored the phenomenon of the glass ceiling and the challenges of leadership

in the Ghanaian context. The study interviewed 10 Ghanaian women leaders who shared their experiences. The study found that women continue to face a number of challenges, even though they have broken the glass ceiling and gained access to leadership positions in Ghanaian business organizations. The main challenges relate to gender, discrimination, age and their role as mothers and wives. Haslam and Ryan (2008) have studied the phenomenon of the glass cliff in the context of British organizations. By the phenomenon of the glass cliff, the authors refer to a situation where women are more likely than men to be selected for management positions at a critical time when the job involves significant risks, and the probability of failure is higher. The study found that women were perceived as being better suited to leadership roles in an organization when the role is risky or in crisis, while men were more likely to be selected for leadership roles that do not carry such high risks. Haslam and Ryan (2008) stress that the results can be interpreted from different perspectives. One could argue that women have a special potential for crisis management and characteristics that help them to cope with stress, and that is why women are chosen for leadership positions in times of crisis. On the other hand, it is likely that this is more related to the idea that women can be placed in stressful leadership situations because they are considered less valuable than male leaders. Haslam and Ryan (2008) also point out that if their analysis of the phenomenon is correct and women as a minority face a glass ceiling, it is likely that other minorities, such as persons with disabilities, will also experience a glass ceiling.

African grassroots disability related NGOs and OPDs are often the only voice of people with disabilities in society, as they are in constant contact with their own people and communities. However, the discourse on civil society is often Eurocentric and this poses an epistemological challenge to the study of African NGOs (Kalfelis & Knodel 2021, 4). A case study in Zimbabwe on access to social services for women with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that the pandemic increased the marginalization and inequality of women with disabilities (Chadambuka et. al. 2024). Government, local actors and NGO have a key role to play in disability mainstreaming (ibid). The role of OPD's is essential for development research and development cooperation. OPD can play a key role in convincing other organizations of the importance of disability mainstreaming in development cooperation. One concrete way to advance the status of persons with disabilities is to work towards the

implementation of the CRPD in mainstream development cooperation (Veen et al., 2013, 365). However, there are countries in Africa that have not ratified CRPD or the optional protocol. Nevertheless, ratification does not in itself guarantee that the position of people with disabilities would improve. This may be affected for example by limited funds. There are shortcomings in how tools developed to monitor the implementation of disability agreements are applied. Therefore, it would be particularly important to strengthen national and international monitoring in order to ensure that agreed political decisions are put into practice (Jolley et al., 2018).

Research on mentoring women with disabilities in the African context is scarce, but a few studies have highlighted the importance of mentoring for African women's leadership. Research on women's political leadership in the South African context highlights that male dominance in leadership positions can undermine women's ability to find mentors and role models and, as a result, hinder their professional development and growth (Ntuli et al., 2023, 13). A study by Amondi (2017) examining the factors behind the under-representation of women in senior education administration and leadership positions at the Ministry of Education headquarters in Kenya, revealed gaps in mentoring and suggested the creation of mentoring systems for women in leadership positions. A study by Titi Amayah and Haque (2017) in sub-Saharan Africa showed that mentoring can contribute to success and have a positive impact on the self-confidence and self-esteem of the women being mentored.

A case study focusing on the leadership of East African religious women explored how sustainable leadership strategies manifested themselves in the work roles of women who participated in the leadership development program. The results showed that leadership development promoted sustainable leadership initiatives, skills refinement through mentoring and the dissemination of development projects. According to this study, mentoring benefited both mentors and mentees, helping them to build a new conversation about leadership in the organization. With the support of mentoring, the mentees adapted their skills and, together with their mentors, became change agents. In addition, self-efficacy increased for both mentors and mentees. In the process, participants used the knowledge and skills they acquired to launch development projects and improve existing programmes (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012).

2.5 History of disability in Africa

In this section, I review the literature on the history of disability in different parts of Africa. It is essential to understand the historical aspects of Africa in order to look at the present, as colonial rule created the physical infrastructure and political foundations for Africa's cultural heritage (Peterson 2015, 4). However, there are very different interpretations of disability within Africa in different communities and cultures, and it is not possible to address them comprehensively in this study. As Hassanein (2015, 1-4) emphasizes, perceptions, concepts and practices of disability and inclusion vary depending on culture, religion, and context.

2.5.1 Interpretations about disability in African history

In the pre-colonial era, disability was perceived both positively and negatively in different regions of Africa. In some regions, people with disabilities were seen as innocent victims of fate and accepted as a gift from the supernatural. Disability was viewed more tolerantly and even positively in some communities, for example in Zambia, Botswana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Nigeria (Ndlovu, 2023, 130).

M. Miles (2004) discusses the history of deaf and people with disabilities across Africa between 1450 and 1960. Research shows that deaf people played an active role in society during this period. Evidence of this can be found in a number of historical records, including folklore, literature, missionary archives, linguistic studies, travellers' documents, religious writings, government, dance and drama. However, Euro-language textual sources mainly mention African male deaf people who were in contact with Europeans. The writings mainly mention people with mild hearing impairment or people who experience disability only in old age. However, the evidence is fragmented. (M. Miles 2004, 532; 542-543).

Power (2001) describes how people with disabilities in Southern Africa are object by institutionalized discourses of development and they are often forced to have positions on the outermost margins of their societies. Author stresses that disability was institutionalized under colonialism in the way how in many precolonial societies, people with disabilities were considered on the basis of their ability to participate in the life and well-being of their communities. However, studies on disability in the

colonial period are a little researched topic (Devlieger 1998). During the colonial period in the South Africa region, children with disabilities were segregated into their own special schools. The funding of these schools was covered by the churches or charity-based, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, this included the assumption that the recipient of funding will adopt Christianity. The medical and charity-based model was the prevailing thinking. In the 1980s community-based rehabilitations and inclusive education emerged as key trends (Kabzems & Chimedza 2002). The disability movement in Southern Africa is largely influenced by activism in Zimbabwe in the 1970s, when people with physical disability began to organize themselves in their own communities (Miles 1996). In Botswana, blindness or reduced mobility is seen as a natural part of ageing. Historically, such abnormalities have been associated with spiritual understanding or other abilities rather than disability (Livingston 2006, 119).

2.5.2 Colonialism and disability

Patrick Devlieger (1998) discusses in his article Cyrene's missionary work and the representation of physical disability in colonial Zimbabwe. Devlieger argues that in the colonial context, helping people with disabilities was part of the missionaries' civilizing mission. He also highlights the importance of the conversion to Christianity of children supported by Anglican missionaries. Tungaraza (1994), points out that educating children with disabilities was not necessarily the missionaries' main goal. Evidence of this can be found in the colonial period in Tanzania when German missionaries placed particular emphasis on training the most able individuals to help spread Christianity. Looking at the history of education in Tanzania, both ordinary and special schools were initiated by church organisations. These education systems isolated children with special needs from society, whereas before colonization of the country, children with disabilities had lived as part of the community. In Tanzania, spiritual interpretations, indigenous belief systems and Western biomedicine are intertwined with Christianity and Islam, and meanings of disability are formed by the interaction of all these (Brocco, 2015). There is a strong belief in witchcraft in rural Zambia and witchcraft is thought to be behind epileptic seizures. These beliefs are not limited to the uneducated. (Baskind & Birbeck 2005.)

Between 1961 and 1966, Ghana had a rehabilitation programme for the people with disabilities, which was introduced under the government of President Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah's rehabilitation programme was based on British social orthopedics, which was used in colonial Ghana, on the Gold Coast in the 1940s. The aim of the Nkrumah's rehabilitation programme was to integrate Ghanaians with disabilities into the workforce as productive wage earners. (Grischow 2011) The programme led to the development of organisations that operate with state support. This in turn laid the foundations for the emergence of a strong disability movement in the 1990s. The disability movement played a key role in the Disability Act 2006, which can be seen as an important step forward for human and disability rights in Ghana. (Grischow 2011; Oduro 2009).

Livingston (2006) looks at the history of disability from the perspective of men disabled as a result of accidents in the mines of Botswana. Livingston makes observations on the historical dimension of disability in Botswana. The author found a contradiction in the way disability studies marginalized the somatic dimensions of disability, while in Botswana somatic dimensions were highlighted. Author argues that Euro-American culture is dominated by an emphasis on individuality and autonomy, with rights-based language and physiological concepts at its core, while Botswana emphasises the social permeability of the body and the person. While disability studies emphasises the social construction of disability, it often implicitly highlights notions of an individual self, with an individually bounded body, which is itself a social construct.

2.5.3 Disability activism in Africa

Disability activist Joshua Malinga (2015, 274) discusses the reasons behind the emergence of the disability movement and disability organisations in Africa. According to Malinga, paradigm's shift from a medical model to a social model has had a decisive impact on attitudes towards people with disabilities, as well as on the experiences of persons with disabilities themselves. Malinga (2015, 274) sees that declarations such as 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons and Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992) had a significant impact, as it gave many persons with

disabilities the opportunity to network internationally at all levels and as a result persons with disabilities began to organize and unite more than ever before.

Historically, services for people with disabilities in Africa have been provided by charitable organizations and funded by industrialized countries, while state provision has been limited. For example, special schools and hospitals for different disability groups have been part of African societies for many years. However, many of these organizations have failed to involve people with disabilities in decision-making, which has contributed to a lack of responsiveness to the real needs and aspirations of people with disabilities. This led to the need to create organizations where people with disabilities themselves lead and make decisions. This need was met by the foundation of Pan African Federation of Disabled (PAFOD) in Zambia in 1994. PAFOD's central objective is to develop and strengthen national organizations in Africa and to provide an umbrella forum for Africans with disabilities (Malinga 2015, 275). Another significant milestone in the history of disability activism in Africa is the establishment of the African Disability Forum (ADF) in 2014. ADF is the continental membership organization of OPDs in Africa and it was established at UN Conference Centre in Addis Ababa on the initiative of Shuaib Chalklen, at the time UN Special Rapporteur on Disability of the Commission for Social Development (ADF 2024; UN 2014). The aim of the ADF was to harmonize the voice and participation of persons with disabilities, their families and OPDs in all aspects of development and society, at pan-African, sub-regional and national levels. Although there had been many separate OPDs in Africa, there was no representative umbrella organization of OPDs in Africa before the establishment of the ADF (UN, 2014).

2.6 Theoretical choices

The theoretical part of the thesis is based on a decolonial approach together with intersectional feminism and critical disability studies. I recognize the scope of these three theories in relation to the constraints of the master's thesis, but I think that these three theories are essentially complementary to each other and have a lot of common elements. I also consider it essential to include a theoretical framework from the disability studies side, as disability has received less attention in

development studies. I begin this section by discussing the advantages and shortcomings of decolonial theory for this study. I will then discuss the perspectives offered by intersectional feminism and, finally, I will present the foundations of critical disability studies.

2.6.1 Decolonial theory

A decolonial approach to disability is important because it can be used to dismantle harmful power structures. Leslie Swartz (2018) points out that people with disabilities in the Global South are often portrayed through the lens of the Global North. In addition, most of the academic literature on people with disabilities in the Global South is written by people from the Global North, some of whom are person with disabilities and some of whom are not (Swartz 2018, 281). Nguyen (2023, 109) talks about the hierarchy of knowledge that frames perceptions of disability in these geopolitical spaces. In the Global North, disability discourse is centered on identity ethics, disability, citizenship and representation, which are central to the pursuit of disability justice. As Nguyen (2023, 111) stresses that, “A decolonial disability studies approach recognizes the geopolitics of power that shapes specific lived experiences of disabled people in the South”. Tuck and Yang (2012) point out that decolonization is not a metaphor and is not something that can be implanted into existing discourses and frameworks, even if they are critical, pro-justice and anti-racist. Decolonization is not an interchangeable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies. In other words, there is no synonym for decolonization. The easy adoption and transfer of decolonization is yet another form of colonial appropriation (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

When looking at contemporary African societies, it is crucial to take into account the history of colonization and its effects. Ndlovu (2023) talks about how the Eurocentric views has been passed down from generation to generation, perpetuating negative structures. The European hierarchical structuring and ordering from colonialism has been absorbed and reproduced, which has had a detrimental effect on how disability is conceptualized and how it continues to be constructed in the African context. These constructions have been inadvertently applied through cultural beliefs, disability

traditions and disability myths that have been propagated by society, including persons with disabilities themselves (Ndlovu 2023). Saleem Badat (2022) discusses issues related to research on, for, with, in and of Africa in relation to the production of knowledge in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Badat (2022) describes the emergence of problematic power relations as follows: “Unequal social relations powerfully condition who produces knowledge; whose and what knowledges are valued, privileged, and subordinated; in what languages knowledge today is principally produced; who has voice and does not have voice; who publishes and what is published; and who does not publish and what is not published (Badat 2022, 48).” Mignolo (2007, 155-156) points out that history is not exclusively linear, but rather there are several overlapping histories, inter-connected by imperial and colonial powers as well as imperial and colonial differences.

When considering the concept of colonialism, it is essential to understand how the effects of colonialism continue to emerge beyond its apparent end in different ways of thinking and behaving and enduring patterns of power. Thus, colonialism is more than the economic and political consequences of colonialism past and present. It is therefore important to draw attention to the 'Eurocentric epistemology, ontology and ideology' that has legitimized European domination and the hegemony of European knowledge and the fading, elimination and marginalization of the cultures, languages, knowledge and experiences of colonized people. These problems of European epistemology are typically the focus of attention of postcolonial and decolonial theorists (Bulhan 2015, 241). The history of colonization has fundamental effects that are still visible in many African countries. In Kenya, for example, the colonial administration regulated laws and practices that governed the fundamental rights of persons with psychosocial disabilities (Juma & Ngwena 2023). These laws were based on medical thinking, which emphasized the objectification of people with disabilities and their subjection to involuntary treatment in mental hospitals and prisons (ibid). After independence, Kenya maintained these laws, and so the harmful legacy has continued (ibid).

Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) criticize Western academia for ignoring and suppressing African and indigenous knowledge. The authors argue that indigenous knowledge should be taken into account, especially in disability-related research, planning and implementation in Africa. African Indigenous Knowledge (AIK) refers

specifically to the shared archive of experiences, cultural beliefs, norms and values of African peoples. Much of AIK is passed down through the generations in the form of folktales and songs. This also involves interpretations and understanding of local environments. In other words, African people have their own body of knowledge, which it is important to recognize and acknowledge (Owusu-Ansah & Mji 2013). The authors point out that the African experience and worldview are undeniably different from those in the West. While African culture is unique, it is not that it is completely disconnected from all other human experiences and knowledge (Owusu-Ansah & Mji 2013).

Kiwan (2022) states that research on disability has mainly been conducted in the Global North or by researchers from the Global North studying the Global South. This can be seen as postcolonial form of empire, where knowledge is imposed or appropriated in different contexts as a technology of imperial biopower. Critical disability studies have therefore argued that the analysis of disability should be placed at the center of empirical and colonial understanding, given that the vast majority of people with disabilities live in the Global South and, furthermore, that there is a strong correlation between disability and poverty.

According to Schmitt (1996, 48) both colonialism and the current economic system built on its basis require objectification. Author points out that racism is a complex phenomenon that seeks to objectify through various strategies. Different strategies can target different groups of people, such as women, people of color and the working class. Objectification is also central to the practices of the current economic system based on hierarchical human relations. It is typical that people are treated as commodities that can be easily replaced. As a result of the increasing number of aspects of life being based on such thinking, objectification is becoming more common and equal interactions less frequent. Author also underlines that the rejection of systematic racist objectification is not possible as long as we accept objectification in the capitalist economy. Similarly, it is not possible to end the objectification of capitalism as long as there is systematic objectification of gender and race (Schmitt 1996, 48).

The concept of decolonization or, more specifically, its application has also been criticized. Olufémi Táíwò (2022, 4-5) writes about decolonization and the academic

debate surrounding it. According to Taiwo, decolonization has lost its way. By this, the author refers to a development in which decolonization was originally intended to fight direct political and economic control by the West, but has become an all-encompassing idea, often accompanied by a pretence of morality or authenticity; thus stifling African thought and denying African agency. Olúfemi Táíwò strongly rejects the indiscriminate application of decolonization in a wide range of fields, including literature, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, medicine and psychology. Author argues that the decolonization industry, obsessed with cataloguing injustices, is seriously damaging the science of and about Africa. Lerato Posholi (2024), on the other hand, criticizes Taiwo's views for not paying attention to the role that decolonization discourses have played in bringing the politics of knowledge production in Africa to the attention of young scholars in particular. Posholi (2024) stresses that it is necessary to question whether the concept and language of decolonization has lost its relevance, but nevertheless it can be seen that it has played a significant role in bringing renewed attention to the politics of knowledge in Africa.

2.6.2 Intersectional feminism

Over the decades, intersectionality has proved to be a useful concept, and intersectional framework has been applied in various fields such as feminist- and queer studies, sociology, literature, philosophy, anthropology, and law (Cho et al., 2013). Since intersectional analysis is an interdisciplinary and widely used concept in different fields (see *ibid.*; Gillborn, 2015), the purpose of this chapter is to justify choosing to use intersectional analysis and to discuss the factors supporting the decision. The aim is to understand the impact of disability and gender on an individual's experience of leadership. This delimitation of the topic is well supported by the finding that there is a limited number of studies that address disability and gender from an intersectional perspective (see Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Instead, these marginal positions have been studied separately.

Intersectionality is a concept introduced by Kim Crenshaw in the 1989 article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics*.

Intersectionality can be understood as intersecting and overlapping characteristics

that simultaneously affect human position and often cause multiple discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Gillborn (2015) notes that intersectionality is a widely used, but sometimes incorrectly applied, concept in contemporary social science. The concept can be used to analyze questions about how multiple forms of inequality and identity, such as disability, race, class, gender and so on are intertwined in different contexts and over different time periods. Frederick and Shifrer (2019) argue, that representations in disability research and disability activism have been dominated by experiences and identities of white, middle-class people with disabilities as they have had better access to leadership positions than people of color.

Intersectionality is a term used to refer to the phenomena that different overlapping factors of an individual affect the human opportunities and experiences of discrimination in society. It can be used to examine broad processes and identities where inequalities are caused by several factors at the same time (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019, 200). Through intersectional feminism, we can observe a complex system of oppression in which different privileges and hierarchical power relations affect individual opportunities in life (Carastathis, 2014). To understand the concept of intersectionality, it is essential to understand its inherent relation to power (Cho et al., 2013). The term intersectionality was intended to draw attention to the dynamics of difference and the solidarity of sameness in anti-discrimination policies.

Furthermore, concept of intersectionality sought to expose the problematic nature of uniaxial thinking in legal context, in the production of scientific knowledge and in the promotion of social justice. (Cho et al., 2013.)

An intersectional framework is crucial when conducting research on the experiences of people with disabilities, as people with disabilities are often simply reduced to a label or diagnosis and their other identities and experiences are ignored (Cascio et al. 2021, 23). Manning et al. (2016) sees development policy as benefiting from an intersectional approach, as it could reveal unconscious biases and assumptions, as well as structural political power relations that cause marginalized groups, such as women with disabilities, to be excluded from development cooperation. Wallace et al. (2018) argue that the successful use of intersectionality as a theoretical framework requires an understanding of both intersecting social identities and structural inequalities and the relationship between the two.

Watermayer and Swartz (2023) call for caution in the use of the concept of intersectionality. Authors use the term lazy intersectionality. They describe it as a situation in which disability-related disadvantages are denied or hidden, by individuals and organisations. They argue that intersectional analyses can sometimes partially exclude discussions of how disability interacts with other factors.

Watermayer and Swartz (2023) identify three ways in which intersectionality can be misused. Selective intersectionality considers only certain forms of exclusion. Subtractive intersectionality, on the other hand, is a situation in which other privileges are seen as removing the reality of exclusion caused by disability. Thirdly, the authors mention last instance intersectionality, where one historical experience is seen to outweigh other existing forms of exclusion. All these misguided ways of using the concept of intersectionality can contribute to the exclusion of people with disabilities. Manning, Johnson and Acker-Verney (2016) point out that drawing on intersectionality in development policy and practice would require asking critical questions such as how multilevel power relations affect decisions about whose experiences are included and whose are excluded.

Historically, criticism of Western feminism has been voiced especially by women in Africa and the diaspora. Western feminism has been seen as failing to recognize its own inherent racism and making one-sided and generalized assumptions about the status of women in societies globally and how patriarchy is perceived. In other words, the experiences of black women on these issues have been ignored and disregarded. (Rodrigues et al. 2015, 11.) Filomina Chioma Steady's *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (1981) can be seen as a historically groundbreaking work that pioneered an interdisciplinary debate on the lives of black women in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and the United States (ibid.7). Steady (1981) criticises the concept of feminism and the prevailing discourse in feminist studies that emphasises the rights of white middle-class women while ignoring the experiences of black women. She sees sexism as a real and harmful phenomenon, but stresses that attention should also be more focused on wider social problems such as the effects of racism, colonialism, capitalism and class discrimination. According to Steady, African women have created their own definition of feminism based on traditions of autonomy, self-reliance and survival.

2.6.3 Critical disability studies

The simplistic dichotomy between disabled and non-disabled people does not hold true, because disability has a context-bound nature, which takes many different levels and in many different forms across a wide spectrum of diversity (Katsui 2023a; Vehmas & Shakespeare 2014). The American sociologist and disability activist Irving Zola (2005) criticises the concept of "special needs", arguing that disability should be understood as part of what it means to be human, not as a marginal phenomenon that separates people from one another. Zola (2005) called for a universalisation of disability and the idea that disability is part of the continuum of embodiment on which we all humans are situated. In other words, we are all susceptible to different types of disability and illness, and with ageing most people experience some form of disability. A critical disability perspective examines the prevailing constructs in society and seeks alternative methods for growth and economic development (Katsui, 2023a). Critical disability studies call for the analysis of disability to be placed at the centre of empirical and colonial understanding, since the vast majority of people with disabilities live in the Global South and there is a strong correlation between disability and poverty (Kiwani, 2022).

According to Nguyen (2023, 109) critical disability studies sees that disability and ability are discursively intertwined with colonialism, racism, ableism⁷ and other forms of oppression. Meekosha (2011) argue that current disability research is a form of scientific colonialism, and that disability should be situated in the context of the Global South. Meekosha (2011) calls for an analysis of the North-South power relations that produce, sustain and benefit from disability. According to the author, the power of the Global North still depends on how it controls natural resources such as oil. The pursuit of economic interests leads to more and more people being disabled by such things as wars, invasions and dumping polluted waste. The concentration of production chains in countries with cheap labour and the neglect of

⁷ Ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices through which a system of norms is produced about the typical existence and capacities of people based on their abilities. The system emphasises medical and therapeutic interventions and maintains the privileges of those in able-bodied positions (Goodley 2014, 22).

worker safety, for example in sweatshops and dangerous factories, also increases the risk of injury and disability. Grech (2012, 53) speaks of a colonial encounter that is not only a historical event, but also an ongoing process around the ongoing material, discursive, epistemological and ontological control of spaces and bodies in the global South. Although the vast majority of people with disabilities, an estimated 80%, live in the Global South, disability research has mainly focused on Western society and the urban and post-industrial context (Grech 2012, 52; Hassanein 2015, 2). Grech (2012) uses the term critical global disability studies to refer to an openly critical disability studies that prioritizes the full complexity of the global South. On this basis, it can be noted that it is crucial to have studies in a non-Western context. Bregain (2016, 150) points out that the main shortcoming of studies on disability and colonialism is that they portray people with disabilities as passive and marginalized objects, as potential beneficiaries of colonially constructed aid policies, but never as active agents of these policies. Critical disability studies see categories of difference as a social construction in which political practices support people's fit or misfit with their environment, ideas, discourses and material reality (Stienstra et al. 2017, 116).

It is worth noting that many marginalized groups of people share a similar history of exclusion and discrimination. For example, McRuer (2006) talks about how homosexuality and disability share a similar history as phenomena and little attention has been paid to this connection in academic research. According to McRuer (2006), institutions in Western culture produce, maintain and protect both heterosexual and an able-bodied identity. The hegemony of ableism and normality is reinforced as a result of this setup (see McRuer 2006, 151). While similarities can be identified in the history and experiences of different minority groups, it is important to be careful in making these connections. For example, Frederick and Shifrer (2019, 202) criticize the "disability is like race" analogy used in disability activism and critical disability studies. Disability activists and critical disability studies scholars have talked about how disability inequality operates in similar forms of oppression to racial inequality. A qualitative study by Obasogie (2014) compared the experiences of blind and sighted people on race and racial differences. The study involved 106 people who were blind from birth and 25 sighted people. The study found that white blind people make analogies between their own experiences of oppression and those of racial minorities. However, blind people from racial minority groups do not make

such comparisons. Given the above research evidence (Obasogie, 2014; McRuer, 2006, 151) it can be concluded that intersectional research on the experiences of women with disabilities is essential and that critical disability studies is one useful perspective on the subject, especially when seeking to dismantle the hegemony of normality.

3 Methods and data

The method used in this study is content analysis, which I introduce in the first subchapter 3.1. In the second subchapter, 3.2 I describe the data in more detail, starting with the research choices and the stages of data collection. I will then discuss the ethical consideration and positionality, and finally I will give a general overview of the content and atmosphere of the interviews.

3.1 Content analysis

Although historically content analysis has not been mainstreaming in the social sciences, its popularity has grown over the years (Woodrumin, 1984). The technique was first used in the 19th century to analyze speeches, hymns, folklore, newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements and political speeches. Technological advances over the years and the recording of interviews and discussions have enabled more accurate and in-depth analysis (Harwood & Garry, 2003). Content analysis provides an excellent tool for studying attitudes, beliefs, relationships, communication, and organizational dynamics. The potential of content analysis lies in how it connects qualitative symbolic use with quantitative data (Woodrumin, 1984). Content analysis is an empirically based method and research technique that is exploratory of the process and designed to make replicable and valid predictions or draw inferences. The expected reliability of content analysis is based on the technique used which, should lead the researcher to the same results although they may be working in different circumstances or over different time periods (Krippendorff, 2013, 1, 24).

Content analysis can be used to analyze a wide range of data, including verbal, symbolic, pictorial, and communicative data (Krippendorff, 2013, 23). Content analysis is suitable for use in both qualitative and quantitative research and can be broadly divided into two approaches, deductive and inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs 2007). Inductive content analysis is often applied in situations where little or no previous research on the topic exists (Lauri & Kyngäs, 2005). Given the lack of research on the experiences of women leaders with disabilities in the African context,

inductive content analysis is well suited to the needs of this research setting. Inductive content analysis consists of three different steps: open coding, category creation and abstraction (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). However, content analysis is a continuous reflective process, alternating between coding and categorization and returning to the data to form the original analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017)

Manifest content consists of word frequencies and symbol coincidences while latent content is for example thematic interrelations and theme presence (Woodrum, 1984). In this thesis I will focus on manifest content, as analyzing the latent content would include hidden and indirect gestures, just as sighs, laughter, posture and silence (see Robson, 1993). Observing these things is not justified in this research setting. Assessing appearance, tone of speech or body language is an ableist setting because, depending on the disability, an individual may have a different way of producing speech and body language may be affected by physiological factors. Furthermore, the assessment of latent content is not possible in this study with any confidence, as some of the interviews were conducted without video footage to ensure the best possible internet connection.

3.2 Description of the data

In this sub-chapter I present the methods and data of the thesis. The data consists of eight remote semi-structured interviews. Two of the interviewees are from Uganda, two from Kenya, one from Tanzania, one from Ghana, one from Ethiopia and one interviewee from Botswana.

3.2.1 Research choices and stages of data collection

The topic of this thesis originally came from the African Disability Forum (ADF), so through the analysis of the data I sought to respond specifically to a need identified by ADF, which is continental membership body comprising Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in Africa. Abilis Foundation (a Finnish foundation supporting the rights of people with disabilities in the Global South), also expressed a desire for questions that were important for them to find out about the experiences of

the interviewees and these questions have been directly addressed in the interview framework. Remote interviews were the most appropriate choice for this study, as it is unlikely that enough women leaders with disabilities could be found within a single country. Travelling between several countries in Africa would not have been economically feasible, or even sustainable from an environmental perspective. Although remote interviewing imposes certain limitations and challenges on the interview situation, it also has its own advantages. As Hanna & Mwale (2017, 261) note, scheduling is more flexible in virtual interviews, and it also offers participants more anonymity, as participants can choose between video or audio call.

Due to the low number of women with disabilities in leadership positions, more detailed information leading to identification has been faded to avoid any negative consequences for interviewees. Participants were not asked their age or disability group. Besides interviewees were not asked for their exact job title or organization, so that they could feel as safe as possible in expressing their personal experiences. However, most of the interviewees raised issues related to their age, disability group or organization, but I do not see strong justification for disclosing them in the context of the research results.

Finding interviewees proved to be a challenging task, although I had contacts through my internship with both an African disability forum (ADF) and the Finnish Abilis Foundation, which had wide-ranging contacts with OPD's. I asked for help in finding interviewees directly through both the ADF and Abilis and my thesis supervisor Hisayo Katsui, who has extensive networks in the disability field. Through Abilis and ADF I received a list of 7 potential names of women leaders to contact. From this list, an interview was arranged with four people. One interviewee found also through Katsui's contacts. The contact lists I received also contained the same names. In October 2023, I searched for interviewees via social media, as I had not found enough interviewees through the contact details provided. I posted a request for interviews in two different Facebook groups: Disability Inclusion Africa Network and Disability Awareness and Advocacy. The Disability Inclusion Africa Network group had around 600 members, while the Disability Awareness and Advocacy group had over 14 000 members. Both posts received a few likes and shares, but I did not receive any contact through them. My thesis supervisor Katsui then connected me with Virpi

Mesiäislehto, who gave me new contacts for women with disabilities, and this helped me to arrange three more interviews. My initial goal was to find 10 interviewees, but I ended up with 8 and decided that this was a sufficient number for a qualitative study, as the reference group I was looking for was quite marginal and it had been difficult to find interviewees.

The interviews were conducted in two parts. The first five interviews were conducted between November 2022 and February 2023. The last three interviews were conducted between November and December 2023. The interviewer conducted the interviews in Finland, while the interviewee participated remotely from their current locations from Africa. The interviewees were women with disabilities who were leaders at OPDS. Interviews were conducted online at Zoom and Google Meets meetings. One of the interviewees was deaf and the interview was conducted in a written form, as it was not possible to arrange for interpretation for financial reasons. The interviews were semi-structured, and duration was between 22 and 87 minutes. The average duration of the interview was 48 minutes. The interview questions were sent in advance. This was one way of considering the accessibility of the interview situation for the interviewee. Participants were also told that they could ask anything related to accessibility, and I tried my best to meet their needs. For example, one interviewee wanted the questions and consent form to be discussed orally together beforehand before the actual interview. More detailed interview questions can be found in appendix 1, which covers 12 questions as listed.

3.2.2 Ethical considerations and positionality

Cook (2012, 333) points out that there is a greater risk of stigmatization in interview encounter when conducting in-depth interviews with marginalized people. Stigma is a complex phenomenon and is influenced by the purpose of the research, the relative power of the interviewer in relation to the interviewee, and the way in which the formalized nature of contemporary research structures the ways in which the participant can interpret the interviewer's intentions. The researcher should therefore be aware that relationships of stigma can influence the data collected, particularly when working with marginalized participants. While Cook's comments on stigma in the interview situation are worth considering, in the setting of this particular study

the women with disabilities interviewed for this study are all highly educated and in leadership positions and this puts them in better position compared to low-educated women with disabilities. As Fields and Kafai (2009) remark, the bias and worldview of both the interviewee and the interviewer is present both intentionally and unintentionally whenever social research is conducted.

I recognise the problematic setting that as a white person without disability in the Global North I am researching the experiences of women with disabilities in the Global South (see Kiwan 2022). My position in relation to ability and privilege consists of my white western status as a cis woman without disabilities, and socio-economic background that has enabled my access to the academic world. My position in relation to otherness includes to living with dyslexia and growing up in a religious minority as a member of a sexual minority. I think it is important to underline that the results of this study may have been negatively affected by my position as a white Western woman without disabilities, while my gender may have contributed to building trust in the interview situation. Overall, differences in background, culture and position between the interviewer and the interviewee will affect both the interview situation and the analysis itself.

3.2.3 The content and atmosphere of the interviews

At the beginning of the interviews, I briefly introduced myself and my research topic and asked the interviewee if they had any questions about the consent form. I also explained that the interviewee had the right to stop the interview at any time or to refuse to answer any question. The online connection did not always work as desired, and this caused ambiguity in some places in the responses. At the time of the interview, as well as in the recordings, some words or passages are missing due to connection challenge. Because of this, I also often had to ask the answer again. If the connection was particularly bad and I had to ask for specifications repeatedly, this may have caused feelings of frustration for the interviewee. In general, the interviews went well despite some minor technical challenges and the interviewees were patient and offered to clarify their answers again if the internet connection was not working properly. The most ideal would have been to conduct face-to-face interviews.

However, the purpose of the study was to find out the experiences of women with disabilities from different parts of Africa from different countries and organizations. Thus, the possibility of remote interviews best served the purpose of this study.

One of my observations about the interview situations, which was common to almost all interviewees, was the way the interviewees talked about the challenges faced by women with disabilities in general, while bringing up their own personal experiences was secondary, especially for certain questions. This prompted some reflection in me, and I realized that some of the questions could have been worded to emphasize a question wording that seeks out the respondent's own lived experiences. On the other hand, the semi-structured interview allowed me to ask more specific questions, especially if I felt that the answer was too general, and the interviewee did not talk about their own experience. One factor that could potentially influence the way interviewees responded could also be related to their role as a leader, putting aside their own emotions and speaking as an expert on wider social phenomena.

Following the guidelines of Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017, p. 95), I started the content analysis by reading through the transcribed interviews several times to gain understanding. I first started by coding the text with low-level abstractions that were close to the text and gradually moved to the abstract level, through which it was possible to structure groups and categories. When grouping the codes, I proceeded to the more abstract level but found that I did not want to lump several closely related codes into a single one, because I saw the risk that it would steer the research in too general a direction. For example, one interviewee could talk about the lack of reasonable accommodation in society in general, while another mentioned that there was a lack of reasonable accommodation in the OPD. I wanted to keep these as separate codes and not combine them into one code, because although here we can see how ableism cuts the structures of society, the meaning was still quite different. I felt it was important to keep the interviewees' experiences as accurate as possible, as there was a lot of variation in the responses.

4 Analysis and findings

In this chapter, I present the data analysis and findings, which I have divided into two parts in line with the research questions: 1) resources in leadership and 2) challenges in leadership. One thing that came up when going through the material was the scattered responses to certain themes, which meant that the identification of resources and challenges was not unambiguous. For example, some interviewees felt that education had enabled them to progress as managers and therefore, in their case, education was an asset. For those interviewees who had not had the opportunity to train as much as they would have liked, the lack of education was a challenge. Similarly, access to support was an issue that emerged in the responses when asked about the factors that had enabled success. For most, access to support was an important asset, while some interviewees felt that lack of support and having to manage on their own had been a barrier in their career progression. In the analysis section, I have grouped the resources and challenges that emerged from the data according to what the majority of interviewees highlighted. However, I will elaborate further in this section if there was a divergence of responses on a particular topic.

4.1 Resources in leadership

In this section, I present the resources described by the interviewees. From the data, it was possible to identify 3 sets of resources for women with disabilities which are presented in this subchapter. These resources were: 1) Strong self-esteem, ubuntu and servant leadership, 2) Support, mentors, role models and networks and 3) Education and training.

4.1.1 Strong self-esteem, ubuntu and servant leadership

Experiences of the career path to leadership varied. When asked about the factors that have enabled their career development and progression to leadership, interviewees highlighted a variety of factors. Some interviewees had already been in various leadership roles, done volunteering during their school years or for leisure

activities, and therefore saw becoming a leader as a natural progression in relation to their personal history. Interviewee 1 described her path to leadership by accident. Some interviewees said that becoming a leader had come naturally to them, by their own choice. Interviewee 3 said she had always been very confident and believed in her own abilities and what she could do. In her case, the under-representation of women in management roles had motivated her to apply for the leadership position. All 8 interviewees mentioned the importance of self-esteem and confidence in the role of leader. Some of the interviewees spoke about these qualities directly, others more indirectly, but in all the answers, the general theme of belief in oneself and the relationship to self-knowledge emerged. The importance of self-esteem for women with disabilities has also been highlighted in previous research (Meer & Combrinck, 2015, 21; Majiet & Africa, 2015). For women with disabilities, healthy self-esteem appears to be a requirement for effective leadership, and the development of self-esteem and the challenges associated with it can be present in life far into adulthood (Majiet & Africa, 2015). While the leaders who participated in this study perceived their self-esteem as a strength, at the same time, most of the interviewees pointed out that for many women with disabilities, low self-esteem is a barrier to leadership. Low self-esteem can also be influenced by intersectional factors, such as gender stereotypes in addition to disability. As Gipson et al. (2017) points out, the formation of negative self-esteem in women is influenced by the patriarchy and oppression they experience.

In addition to strong self-esteem, humanistic values and the desire to promote the common good were highlighted in the responses. Interviewee 5 described her motivation to leadership as giving a voice to those who have no voice in society. Interviewee 2 said that leadership is about the people we lead and through that it is possible to influence things that benefit everyone and everybody. She felt that her strength was a heart for people and justice, a heart for serving others. She talked about servant leadership and how sacrifice is needed to be a leader who is there for others.

“One of my strengths is really hearth for others, hearth for people, to serve, some other, whatever we called it servant leadership. [...] I don’t look at what benefit, but opportunities to serve people, reach out for others. And using what I have, what is

in me. Because every human being is gifted with the talents and different abilities.”
(Interviewee 2).

Sendjaya et al. (2008) see servant leadership as a useful leadership model in an organizational context (Sendjaya et al. 2008). Although servant leadership was only directly mentioned by name in the responses of interviewee 2, themes related to servant leadership and ubuntu (see 2.3.) values were also raised in other interviewees responses. Many interviewees highlighted values such as solidarity, advocacy for the weak, survival, community building and spirituality, which are core values of ubuntu (Sendjaya et al., 2008; Madimbo, 2016, 17-108). Interviewee 5 talked about struggling together until goals are achieved. She also felt that her struggles and strength have enabled her to succeed as a leader. Interviewee 7 talked about the trauma that can be caused to persons with disabilities by having an environment that is inaccessible and having to rely on others for help. She describes her experience as follows:

“I remember my own situation when I wanted to go to school, I remember... It was always stairs. Sometimes I'd just be in class for hours waiting, that at the end of class I'd go in and ask somebody to support me and bring me food and things like that. So, it's kind of disturbing, it causes a lot of trauma for these people.”
(Interviewee 7)

While interviewee 7 raised several injustices related to the status of women with disabilities, such as the various forms of discrimination she experienced, she also mentioned things that give her strength. She spoke about the importance of self-esteem, positive thinking, overcoming challenges and the greater meaning behind leadership. Interviewee 7 said that she had no previous leadership experience, but she ended up in the position because she was asked. In her answers she raised the spiritual aspects and the importance of God's plan for her to become a leader. She talked about people's choice and God's factors and how they are connected. She saw that the voice of the people is the voice of God and so when the people have chosen her to lead, she thinks it is her role to show her abilities and assure them that she is capable of leading. She also talked about how women with disabilities experience challenges, but it is possible to overcome them. Interviewee 6 also raised spiritual

aspects. She worked in a faith-based OPD and said she wanted to be involved in making a difference in the church and society at large.

As Pikramenou and Mahajan (2019) point out, religion is one of the key elements influencing the role of African women in society and decision-making, along with other possible intersecting factors. Benham Rennick (2013, 179) remarks that it would be important for Western discourse to recognize that in many countries of the Global South, religion is present in all aspects of community life and its role can be very different from that of many Western secularized societies where religion is seen as private and as a part of culture rather than a holistic issue. In sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of Christians is expected to increase from 26% to 42% between 2015 and 2060 (Pew Research Center 2017, 12). The number of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa is also expected to grow from 16% to 27% over the same period (ibid). High birth rates in the region are a key factor in these trends (ibid). Rakodi (2012) points out that while patriarchal structures influence many religious communities, (as in society) women can reinterpret religious traditions and experience empowerment. In other words, women's role in these communities may be limited or excluded from leadership positions, but on the other hand, women can learn a range of skills and accumulate social resources in religious communities (ibid).

According to Ndlovu (2023), applying the principles of ubuntu, together with decolonial thinking based on diversity, it is possible to achieve a situation in which the idea that persons with disabilities are equally human and capable of producing knowledge becomes more prevalent. Ngunjir (2014) makes a similar observation by stressing that there is a great need for leadership that is approached through spirituality and ubuntu values not only in Africa, but also wherever social inequality affects society. Ubuntu's values were also reflected in the interview with interviewee 4, which highlighted the idea of defending the weaker position.

“I have always been vocal like I'll call you out I have always been in that person who could speak out. [...] I've been bullied yes here and there and in my academic life like at school by other students and all that. But it has never really bothered me that much. For me it has always been thinking about the next person who cannot speak out. [...] I think about the other person who doesn't have the same

personalities as myself like how they could be living, experiencing all this?”
(Interviewee 4).

Interviewee 4 description gives the impression that she is obliged to help others and speak up for them, because she thinks she has the personality for it and has always been naturally vocal. When asked about experiences of discrimination, some interviewees answered in a more general way, without opening much about their own experiences. Some of the interviews revealed various experiences of discrimination, bullying or exclusion either in childhood, in studies or in previous workplaces. However, responses gave the impression that even if you experience traumatic situations, it is possible to overcome, find positive thinking and help others. Interviewee 1 talked about believing in oneself in the following way:

“I think the most important thing would be believing yourself. Because I feel women with disabilities, we doubt ourselves a lot, of course also how we have treated before. The discrimination, stigma has played a big role into of making people self-doubt. But the most important thing you can use is believing you can achieve whatever you are mind to do. I must say that to get where I am, I had to put in a lot of work. I had to work extra hard than most people, in my organisation. But it got me to where I am. I hope people don’t have to do that, don’t have to go through that. If you are believing yourself, you can achieve anything.” (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 1 states that it has taken a lot of hard work to reach the position she is in now, compared to others in her organisation. Her story highlights the common struggle of women with disabilities, but also the idea that believing in yourself is the most important thing. Her description also conveys a sense of solidarity with others as she says that she does not hope others will have to go through what she has gone through. The role of struggle and trauma in the empowerment of women with disabilities has also been discussed in the literature. King et al. (2023b) study highlighted that African women leaders with disabilities can draw on their traumatic experiences and struggles to develop a leadership style based on ubuntu thinking, which has the potential to bring about effective change for people with disabilities. Study also suggests that religion can play a significant role in African women's leadership. Spirituality and support from others can provide strength, focus and

determination for leadership and activism for women with disabilities (King et al. 2023b). According to Chisale (2022), African women are united by shared experiences of oppression. Through collective struggle and shared oppression, women with disabilities can draw on work that seeks to build an alternative reality and equality based on the values of ubuntu.

4.1.2 Support, mentors, role models and networks

One clear resource that emerged from the interviews was the support and role models from the people around them. Interviewees' experiences of receiving support varied. The majority of interviewees felt that the support they have received from different situations in life has been a positive factor in their ability to progress and succeed in leadership roles. Interviewees had received support from family, relatives, teachers, colleagues, government and organization. Forms of support ranged from financial support to providing tools, to providing time and emotional support, for example by attending events in the disability community or helping with childcare to enable work related travel. Interviewee 5 mentioned that she had received support from family, society and her association and she described the support as motivational speeches. Interviewee 4 thought that the support of other people has played an important role in her success. Interviewee 7 saw that support has played an important role for her, as she has received a lot of encouragement and support from her family.

“My family have really supported me, really supported, push more projects that I do in the disability space and the community has also supported me, because if I do project if I do events I need people to be there. I need people to work with me in this project it's not something that I can do as an individual. So, if I look back and I see this success that I have had in my work I realised that it's not something that I would have done as an individual.” (Interviewee 4).

“The first support that I received is from my family from since very young, you know. Then that upbringing from family it has a lot of energy to how you become as an earlier stage. For to me I see that is a beautiful background. And I received a lot

of encouragement from my mom, my lead mom before, when I was schooling. I think that she could always tell me that you are great.” (Interviewee 7).

Although most of the interviewees said they had received support and encouragement from their family, two interviewees also mentioned that they had not received much support from their family. For these interviewees, other role models had played a larger role, such as having a female teacher in school, or having received support and encouragement during their career from colleagues and mentors. On the other hand, in interviews where it appeared that they may not have received enough support or encouragement, there was an emphasis on thinking that they believed in themselves and that they were naturally confident in their own abilities and potential for success. Interviewee 3 describes experiencing self-reliance as she did not have people to rely on. Interviewee 8 said that she had received support from organizations in the form of being introduced to regional, national and international advocacy work promoting the rights of women and girls with disabilities. The interviewee 8 felt that through this she had gained knowledge, experience and the ability to manage and lead. She saw that this experience would also give her a better chance of establishing and managing her own organization in the future.

Almost all interviews highlighted the importance of mentoring. However, there was some variation in the responses as to whether the interviewee felt they had received enough mentoring. Interviewee 6 mentioned the role of mentoring on the way to becoming a leader. Interviewee 2 raised the attention that there should be more mentoring for women with disabilities. She saw that mentoring can give young women and girls the courage and desire to lead when they see what others have achieved. She also saw mentoring as contributing to sustainable leadership and growth. As discussed in more detail in section 2.4, Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012) study on sustainable leadership strategies highlighted the benefits of mentoring in an organizational setting. Developing the leadership capacity of African women leaders can contribute to a broader development where organizations can respond both locally to the needs of society and also the global challenges (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). In other words, leadership development can encourage women to take on leadership roles while becoming active agents in their societies (ibid).

Intersectional feminism is a useful framework for analyzing mentoring opportunities for women with disabilities. Indeed, it seems that the gaps in mentoring and access to support and role models are linked to wider social inequalities and the intersectional position of women with disabilities. As a result of patriarchal structures, women are poorly educated and leadership positions are male dominated, which may indicate that it can be challenging for women leaders to find female mentors (Ntuli et. al. 2023, 18). Considering that several factors have a negative impact on the career development of persons with disabilities, ranging from the poverty faced by persons with disabilities (Mitra et al., 2013), general prejudice (King et al. 2023) and lack of access to education (Simbaya et. al., 2019) and challenges in social participation (UN Women 2023, 14), it is likely that the lack of mentoring is also partly due to the wider barrier environment and multiple discrimination faced by woman with disabilities.

Interviewees were asked about their networks and whether they are in contact with other women leaders with disabilities. All interviewees mentioned different ways of networking such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, email lists and LinkedIn. However, experiences of networking varied. Interviewee 6 said that she is not in any informal groups, but only communicates directly by email with people she knows. Some interviewees pointed out that networking groups were useful and in the best cases even friendships had been formed. However, some interviewees also mentioned that there was a need for more networking, especially between leaders. The interviews revealed that being part of different networks or informal groups did not necessarily mean that one was actively connected or that the members of the group knew each other well.

The data from this study suggests that support in various forms; role models, networks and mentoring were a clear strength for a large proportion of the interviewees, but the responses also highlighted gaps in the availability of support. It would be useful to develop different forms of support to improve the leadership experience of women with disabilities. As Titi Amayah & Haques (2017) note, access to mentoring for women should be developed, as mentoring is linked to success and has a positive impact on the self-confidence and self-esteem of the women being mentored.

4.1.3 Education and training

Access to education and employment for women with disabilities is essential, as it supports women's independence from others (Hartmann, 2022,6). As highlighted in the Simbaya et al., (2019) study, access to education for persons with disabilities is affected by socio-economic backgrounds and those living in rural areas may have less access to education, for example because paying school fees can be a challenge. Many African women with disabilities experience discrimination and stigma (King et al. 2023). Families may invest more in the education of boys, including boys with disabilities than on education of girls with disabilities (UN, 2020, 17). In Malawi, for example, it has been noted that some parents may have fears about their child's ability to cope at school, or it may be thought that disclosure of a child with a disability will stigmatize the whole family and affect siblings' marriage prospects (ibid). Moreover, in many African countries, women with disabilities have less access to education compared to women without disabilities, men with disabilities and men without disabilities (UN, 2018, 104-105).

Interviewees had a variety of educational backgrounds. Three of the eight interviewees had a master's degree, four had a bachelor's degree and possibly a master's degree in progress or planned. One of the interviewees had college level education. Interviewee 2 found it problematic that a certain level of qualification and education is required to become a leader, but not everyone has equal access to it. Interviewee 1 described the challenges faced by women with disabilities in accessing opportunities in life, such as accessing education or participating in a project that could benefit their career development. She said she had to work extra hard to get where she is now. Interviewee 1 also spoke about the importance of education and how challenging it was when education did not meet the criteria required for employment, as she had a college level education. As the literature shows, education affects the opportunities for women with disabilities not only in terms of employment and career advancement, but also in terms of providing them with greater legitimacy in leadership roles (Mizunoya & Mitra 2013; King et al., 2021).

“I can say that I have missed many opportunities because of not meeting such criteria in education. I think education plays a very big role in leadership and especially how people would treat you [...] because people don't believe you can be

smart if you don't have a degree or something like that. So it takes a lot of energy and the need to prove yourself that you belong there, and you have earned it.“
(Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 1's experience of how the level of education affects how people treat you suggests that through education it is possible to earn the respect and trust of others. The interviewee describes that a lot of energy goes into asserting competence. In interviews the importance of education for women with disabilities was also described as a foundation for everything, and in several interviews, it was pointed out that through education you build up the knowledge and skills to be able to take on leadership positions but also to be successful in the job. Interviewee 7 reflected that without the education she had, it would have been very difficult to try to manage people, monitor staff and manage systems.

Interviewee 3 assumed that the lack of women in leadership positions may be partly due to the low level of education of women. In addition, it can be difficult to succeed in a leadership position if you do not have the skills required for managerial work, such as the skills of speaking well or working in a team. On the other hand, interviewee 3 pointed out that there are many young, educated women who are not in leadership positions. She saw this as a result of women's low self-esteem and the prevailing attitudes in society that the man is the head of the family. Indeed, in many African cultures, views of men as the head of the family are still strong, and this can be seen as a link to gender-based violence (Mukhutoso, 2021). Interviewee 4 described education as an important foundation for leadership. Interviewee 4 saw a strong link between education and leadership. She said that through education it is possible to make your voice heard and be an advocate, and education is the basis for this. She saw that it all starts with education and through education it is possible to learn the skills needed for leadership. Like interviewee 4, interviewee 5 saw education as a fundamental issue in relation to the role of women with disabilities in society at large.

“Education is basic or base for everything. It is a source of information, source of empowerment, source of income. And you know, without education there is no life. [...] Especially for, when we are looking us for women with disability, education is basic element, or basic needs for persons with disability, especially women with

disability. [...] Without education there is no leadership, there is no income, there is no empowerment, there is no advocacy.” (Interviewee 5).

Interviewee 5 describes the nature of education as a basis for general well-being. This is particularly important for women with disabilities because, as interviewee 5 mentions, education provides opportunities for employment and thus a source of income. This is particularly important for women with disabilities, considering the link between poverty and disability (see Yeo & Moore 2003). According to UNESCO (2023), poverty and income inequality often intersect with other factors of discrimination, leading to educational exclusion. For example, gender discrimination is significantly combined with other marginalized positions such as poverty, indigenous identity and disability, leading to a high degree of exclusion of girls from their educational rights (UNESCO 2023, 25).

Interviewee 2's view was that every person is special and is born with talents and gifts, but education is an avenue through which talents and skills can be sharpened and even grow to a higher level. Interviewee 7 talked about how education helps to identify your own rights and knowledge helps in self-advocacy. As Hartmann et al. (2022, 6) study shows, South African women with physical disabilities are looking for education and economic independence, as dependence on others increases their risk of abuse and violence. Although interviewee 7 did not talk about dependence on others, she highlighted the knowledge provided by education, which makes it possible to recognize your own rights. The education was also seen as providing theoretical knowledge that was useful in practical work as a leader. Interviewee 8 talked about how education has helped in understanding the concepts of programming and organizational management and provided tools for developing community programmes to support vulnerable people, especially people with disabilities. She saw that education has played an important role in enabling her to become a leader, because through training she has learned the qualities of a leader and how to lead by example.

There was some variation in the responses as to whether the interviewee felt they had received enough training. Several of the interviewees had participated in the ADF's leadership programme for young women with disabilities. The interviews highlighted the usefulness of the program both in terms of networking and developing leadership

skills. However, interviewee 3 pointed out concern that the same people repeatedly participate in training programmes and saw room for improvement for OPD's, as they have the power to influence who goes to these training programmes.

Interviewee 2 noted that there should be more tailored training programmes for women with disabilities.

Interviewee 6 described how through education she has learned the theoretical basis of both disability and development and how disability is part of development processes, both economic and social development. She saw that it is possible to put this knowledge into practice when you have progressed to the point where you have influential position in OPD, and you can make sure that the nexus between disability and development is taken into account. The disability development nexus and disability mainstreaming in international cooperation has also been highlighted in the literature (Wickenden et al. 2022; Katsui 2023).

When considering the role of education and training, it is useful to take into account the historical context of disability and the colonialism practiced in Africa. When examining the role of education in the leadership of women with disabilities through decolonial theory, it is important to ask who produces the knowledge and whose voices are heard? Badat (2022) talks about the dynamics of problematic power relations and who produces knowledge and what kind of knowledge is valued and what kind of knowledge is pressed down. It can be argued that historical processes, both colonialism and patriarchal social structures, which have isolated women with disabilities from society and education (see Tungaraza 1994; Gipson et al., 2017; Ntuli et. al. 2023, 18) continue to contribute to the low access to education for women with disabilities and the perceived low value of knowledge produced by women with disabilities. It is also essential to recognize that patriarchal attitudes can have a negative impact on women with disabilities' access to managerial positions, even if they have the necessary skills and education for these positions, as pointed out by interviewee 3.

4.2 Challenges in leadership

4.2.1 Gender-based violence and patriarchal structures

A study in Mwanca, Tanzania found that women with disabilities are at increased risk of intimate partner violence (Meyer et al. 2023). The capacity of civil society to address gender-based violence has been studied in Botswana. Hanass-Hancock et al. (2020) interviewed 17 OPDs and NGOs. The results of the study suggest that the level of OPDs' response to violence against women with disabilities is insufficient. Noteworthy in the study is that none of these organizations had a female leader (Hanass-Hancock et al. 2020). The lack of skills and resources of organizations to address violence experienced by women is a real challenge also in the sense that NGOs and OPDs are widely believed to play an important role in reaching marginalized groups and filling service gaps in low- and middle-income countries (Dunkle et al., 2018). Gender-based violence was a theme that emerged in the interviews. Interviewee 4 spoke about the importance of women leaders and saw that if there were more women leaders in OPDs, they could bring issues of particular concern to women into the public debate.

“When you are a women with disabilities so we need, we know that currently a lot of women with disabilities affected by gender-based violence and we don't hear a lot of reports. I think even now if we were to look at the statistics of women with disabilities who have been affected by gender based violence, we don't have a lot of numbers because they are not vocal, they are not reporting this issues so is a gap in that [...] We need more voices of women with disabilities to take up roles and spaces in leadership positions to be able to speak out on issues that directly affect them [...] What I believe is if have women, more women with disabilities in leadership positions they were help us bridge such gaps. ” (Interviewee 4).

In interviewee 4's experience, statistics do not tell the whole truth about how much gender-based violence women with disabilities face, as reporting it can be a big threshold for many women with disabilities. This finding is also supported by studies.

Women with intellectual disabilities in South Africa are more likely to be subjected to violence, may not be able to recognize or respond to it, are less likely to report it and are less likely to be believed when they try to report it (Meer & Combrinck 2015, 21). Interviewee 4 saw that women leaders with disabilities could encourage victims to report their experiences of gender-based violence if the issue was brought more into the public debate in OPDs. Interviewee 6 stressed the importance of educating the men about gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights. She also saw wider societal issues at the root of gender-based violence, such as the majority of men in positions of power in health care and various communities, who may not have a sufficient understanding of gender-based violence and how to act more responsively toward that. Interviewee 8 talked about training men to be more accepting and supportive of women in leadership positions in OPDs. She saw this as a way of bridging the gender gap, but also changing the general culture where sexual violence can manifest itself, for example in the way certain supervisors engage in intimidation at the workplace.

Interviewee 7 spoke about her personal experience of gender-based violence at OPD. Interviewee 7 reported an incident of unreliable behaviour by a male volunteer working under her. According to the interviewee, his unreliability had manifested itself, for example, in his attempts to demand large sums of money from the organisation and in his conduct of taking important documents from the office, but lying about having taken them. The documents were eventually returned by the employee, but they were in a very poor condition. In addition, according to the interviewee, the employee had not carried out the tasks he had promised to do. Interviewee 7 stressed in her interview the frustration that some men are trying to make the work of women leaders more difficult and intentionally create a situation where women-led organisations are seen as failures, as if to prove that women are incapable of leadership. In the following quote, interviewee 7 describes how women with disabilities are not seen as capable of holding leadership positions:

“Because most of the people around us they tend to think that women with disabilities do not deserve to be lead as now they cannot say that verbally but they do say that through actions. Like very since I recall a number of times that I could hire man with the disability or without disabilities but I think that they do... you

could really feel that there is gender-based violence. Is like they don't want to be told... it's like they don't believe in what you are saying. [...] sometimes people without disabilities are using that as a way to show that women are not capable so they could make environment hard.” (Interviewee 7.)

Interviewee 7 describes how gendered violence against women with disabilities' leadership can be implicitly manifested through action, even if it is not explicitly stated. In the interviewee's experience, some men tend to make an environment difficult for women in leadership to work at. Similarities can be found in Majet's and Africa's (2015) research data, which shows that women leaders with disabilities working in OPD's in Zimbabwe have experienced male colleagues as obstructing and even sabotaging the campaign for gender equality. Indeed, in many African countries, patriarchal structures dominate and the idea that men are better leaders than women prevails (Titi Amayah & Haque 2017).

Intersectional feminism is a useful framework for examining the gender-based violence faced by women with disabilities. Collins (2015, 12) points out that it is unlikely to find solutions to violence against women if the phenomenon is approached through a mono-categorical lens, such as a gender lens, where perpetrators are men and victims are women, or a racial lens, where police violence against black men is prioritised over domestic violence against black women (Collins 2015, 12). Looking at the concerns raised by interviewees about gender-based violence and taking into account previous research on the subject, it can be seen that disability and gender simultaneously influence experiences of oppression in complex ways. It seems that gender-based violence can be committed by both men without disabilities and men with disabilities, as revealed by interviewee 7. Thus, a shared minority position on disability does not necessarily protect against sexism and gender-based violence.

One challenge that emerged from the data in the experiences of women leaders with disabilities was the patriarchal structures both in wider society and in the organizational culture of OPDs. General attitudes in society, such as the idea that the man is the head of the family and that women's agency is often denied, were seen one of the key challenges. In the organizational environment, the favoring of men in the

workplace and the male dominance of management roles were highlighted.

Interviewee 3 saw that in addition to educating women, it is essential to encourage women to aim higher and not to lag behind compared to men. Interviewee 3 criticizes the way in which girls are taught to depend on their brothers for support, when it would be important to teach girls that hard work can get you further and to encourage them to do so. As Majiet and Africa (2015) notes, women with disabilities are often described as weak and in need of constant support and this affects general culture and attitudes. However, the interviewee 3 stressed that she would not be letting these things discourage her but would strive to get a job or a position and try to prove her abilities through work.

“So the issue with my gender itself has to do with just general misconception that people have about women thinking that if I have to choose between man and woman I pick a man because I feel he can do it better. It just those general things. And, for me, I always do not let those me.. those things bring me down. I always say that you just give me the opportunity and I prove to you that I can do it. So, for the most part is that something that people doubt in my capability just because of my gender. I always try to get that position and let the work out do and speak through me.” (Interviewee 3).

Intersectional feminism aims to deconstruct gender stereotypes and societal roles constructed and linked to different intersectional positions, with male dominance affecting both disability and gender at the same time (see Crenshaw 1991, 67). Interviewee 3's story reveals stereotypes about women's skills and agency, which emphasise traditional gender roles. On the other hand, the interviewee's thinking reveals an attempt to dismantle these stereotypes through the desire to demonstrate and prove her own skills by showing it through her work. The under-representation of women in leadership positions in the African context is linked to complex underlying factors such as social and organisational cultural biases, different and often more demanding expectations of women compared to men, and conflicts between women's gender roles and leadership positions (Titi Amayah & Haque 2017). Interviewee 1 talked about how certain organisations use the face of women to show the outside world that they are inclusive and equal, but in reality, the woman is just there to represent that face and has no real decision-making power.

“Even in generally organisations who will include women for a so-called painting [...] But in reality, the woman is just there to represent that face.. It’s not like they want.. If they have a choice, probably women would not be there. So, we are so far from equality. Even so many times you get men been given the leading roles compare to women... So we need to be more vocal on the importance of intersectionalities and the fact that we are just not advocating for women to be included but to be given the rightful place because they have deserve it, because they have earned it. [...] They just want to have that symbol of them showing people that they are very inclusive. That they don’t discriminating, they are okey with having women those position... But in the real sense the woman are just there to represent, to just show the face.”

(Interviewee 1).

From the interviewee's 1 description, characteristic of tokenism can be identified. Tokenism refers to the phenomenon where a minority person is hired for a particular position for which they fully meet the entry requirements and have the necessary skills, but the real motive of the employer is to give the impression of non-discrimination and diversity in the organisation (Zimmer, 1988). Beckwith et al. (2016) notes that in tokenism, the gesture is symbolic and there is no actual inclusion or engagement. Wilson-Kovac et al. (2008) makes similar observations by stressing that getting into leadership positions for people with disabilities is often viewed by peers and subordinates that they have reached the position because of a diversity quota, not because of their expertise and knowledge.

Interviewee 7 talked about a masculine environment and how it can hinder women's agency. She described the situation as follows:

“Most of the African continent not all, but most of most of them are.. there is that, you know masculine type of leadership I would say. So women are more taken as oppressed and then they can maybe, they can be restricted from not doing certain stuff or not doing certain things just because of their gender. So maybe some task should only be done by male or only for instance or maybe in the past like women

were not allowed to be maybe electrician or to drive huge cars because of their gender.” (Interviewee 7).

Interviewee 7 describes the division between women and men and how a woman's gender influences which tasks she is seen as suitable for and which she is not. According to the interviewee 7, the masculine environment is reflected in African communities in such a way that men sometimes limit what a woman's agency can be in the community, what a woman can offer to it. According to the interviewee 7, men may remotely tell women not to do something or represent women instead of allowing them to act themselves. The link between masculinity, colonialism and gender-based violence in the African context has also been discussed in the literature (see Gqola, 2007; Schulz & Janson, 2016).

4.2.2 Shortcoming in organizational level

Interviews revealed problematic structures in OPDs. One theme that emerged was challenges related to the nature of the work and how it involves a lot of volunteering. A clear majority of the interviewees had worked first as volunteers in the organization and gradually progressed to management positions. The boundary between voluntary and paid work was not necessarily clear-cut. Interviewee 7 described that she still feels she does a lot of voluntary work, even though she was now in a paid position within the organization. She specified that, for example, applying for funding and finding people to support you takes a lot of time, and as these are critical factors for the functioning of the organization, she felt that this aspect still makes the work partly voluntary. Interviewee 7 talked about how the workload is big and working hard is one way to gain dignity. Interviewee 4 held a chairperson position in OPD on a voluntary basis, in addition to a full-time paid job in another field. She described the situation as requiring a constant balancing of these two jobs and making sure that there is enough time for both roles. Interviewee 1 also talked about how she had to work extra hard to get where she is now.

According to interviewee 8, many organizations also protect abusers.

“At past workplace, when you speak the truth and challenge the head of secretariat and the finance manager you are named unprofessional even when you are in the right and when they are very unprofessional and biased themselves. The compromised committees or individual board also have attitude to discriminate against their own female staff with disabilities by supporting those without disabilities who may have paid them something or given them cheap favors which makes them support wrong practices done by individual management team that put the organization at risk and in a sorry state. [...] The board of directors who are women with disabilities should stop taking cheap favors and support abusers of rights of women with disabilities to continue abusing the women with disabilities rights.” (Interviewee 8).

According to interviewee 8, there is a need for anonymous surveys to report abuse. Interviewee 6, on the other hand criticized how mainstream OPDs do not support women in starting their own organizations. According to her, this is explained by the idea that women's OPDs are not needed because it is already sufficient to have a women's wing or women's desk in the main OPD. According to Interviewee 7, people's motives for working for OPD can be questionable and some people think that there is a lot of money in the organization, and when it turns out that there is not, they may deliberately create problems and sabotage the organization.

“Maybe we would perform more highly if we have support in our leadership. Somebody hear that oh, the woman, a younger woman, woman is taking on leadership. She's now the president of this organisation. Then there should be some funding, to really support that person in leadership. Not as a salary, but as a support.” (Interviewee 2).

Interviewee 8 talked about how it is important for organizations to have programmes that train their management team to motivate their staff, especially women with disabilities, to include them in top positions. She also saw that employees should be encouraged to speak out against discriminatory practices and find good and clear channels to report them. She also stressed the importance of funding programmes targeted at women and tailored to different regions and target groups, such as rural areas, cities, pre-primary and primary schools, secondary schools, universities and colleges.

The inequalities raised by interviewees at the organizational level reveal power hierarchies, such as the hierarchy between able-bodied women and women with disabilities and the preference for women without disabilities. According to Wallace et al. (2018), when looking at issues through an intersectional framework, it is important to consider not only social identities but also structural inequalities and the relationship between the two. Looking at the organizational inequalities highlighted by interviewees, it seems that complex structural inequalities affect the position of women with disabilities in OPD, in other words, at the institutional level. Both ableist and patriarchal power hierarchies play a role in these situations. Ableism can be reflected in some organizations giving preference to women without disabilities over women with disabilities in organizational recruitment and management positions. In addition, patriarchal attitudes and gender-based violence can be expressed at the institutional level through people in positions of power determining whether women with disabilities need their own organizations or whether they are encouraged and supported to establish them.

4.2.3 Socio-economic environment at home

In many African societies, women's primary role is seen as taking care of the household and children. This means that women typically do more housework than men, and the responsibility for childcare and caring for family members falls on them (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2014). Interviewees 2, 6 and 8 talked about the gendered nature of domestic and care work responsibilities. Interviewee 2 talked about the constant balancing between work and domestic chores, describing it as a pollution of the mind.

“Right from the time when we are girls, we are surrounded with many responsibilities, that pushed on a girl child, so time that you are supposed to sit and think through and be creative, be able to share what you want with your life, your future to be, you are busy with tasks surround you. [...] When you are surrounded with so many tasks, it’s like your mind is polluted with this and that. So, you are not thinking directly, even so you have time to do it, other things are coming in mind. I knew this affects directly on girls and women. [...] The time I was spend, reading documents, you are busy doing the garden, so that you may have something to eat.

Those are some of the realities of ground of the African women leaders. And that's why some women would just say no I would not have money that tasks, of course I would not perform. You know, I have to do this and this. Or, if we take upside tasks, then we are overloaded. You have to read. People are sending documents, even now I have documents to read. [...] Me as a leader, as an area of psychosocial and mental disability, you know I must, I really need to read that document and understand it well." (Interviewee 2).

The expression "polluted mind" used by interviewee 2 illustrates well how responsibilities at home can be so exhausting that they affect concentration, creativity and thinking. According to the Interviewee 2, men put time and financial resources into investing in their careers, while women spend time on their children. The interviewee 2 describes how she has repeatedly wanted to finish her Master's degree, but has found that providing for her own children's education is more important and has taken precedence over her own educational dreams. However, Interviewee 2 felt that the support she has received from her family has been crucial, as the role of a leader requires a commitment of time and also working tools like computer. For example, she had been given a computer by her husband because she needed it for her managerial work. This kind of sharing of resources and responsibilities within the family can in turn be seen as a factor supporting the leadership of women with disabilities. However, the accumulation of household chores and caring responsibilities for women is linked to a wider systemic problem of patriarchal structures that restrict women to domestic work, often at the expense of their personal and professional aspirations.

Interviewee 6 talked about how with children comes a certain responsibility and that, for example, organizing a work-related travel requires getting help from an extended family to take care of the children. Female leaders often struggle to balance work and family responsibilities (Steady 2011, 218-219; Titi Amayah & Haque 2017). A study of Ghanaian women leaders' experiences reveals that their responsibilities as mothers caused increased difficulties and stress when trying to reconcile motherhood and leadership (Amakye et al. 2022).

“Most women and young women are single mothers with fathers of their children absent during day and appear only in the night which is a serious challenge among women with disabilities. They need to be employed, supported with their initiatives, businesses so that they can stand alone and manage to educate their children and provide basic needs for their single parent families.” (Interviewee 8).

If the socio-economic challenges raised in the interviews are analyzed using intersectional feminism, several overlapping identities such as gender, disability and socio-economic background can be identified that simultaneously undermine the potential of women with disabilities as leaders. Interviewee 8's description of the absence of men and the accumulation of care and upbringing on women's shoulders reflects deep-seated patriarchal structures in society. Interviewee 6 talked about the responsibility that comes with having children and Interviewee 8 felt that housework and caring for children at home while men are at work poses significant challenges for women with disabilities. The interviewee 2 suggested that the high level of domestic work among women may have an impact on whether women are interested in seeking management positions at all. She described the challenges of unpaid domestic work in relation to being in a managerial position.

Indeed, worldwide, women do most of the unpaid domestic and care work (UN Women 2023). The unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work (UDCW) is both a cause and a consequence of women's economic and social exclusion, limiting their opportunities to be educated and participate fully in society. In sub-Saharan Africa, women will spend an average of 16,65 hours per 24-hour day on UDCW in 2024, while the average time spent by men in the same period is 6.006 (UN Women 2023, 14). Projections based on an international futures model show that at current trends, the time spent by women and men on domestic work will narrow slightly, but the projections show that in 2050 women will still spend 9.5 percentage more time than men on domestic work worldwide, which means 2.3 hours more time per day on UDCW (UN Women 2023).

4.2.4 Competition, lack of accessibility and support

While in some of the interview's support from other people was highlighted as a resource and as something that promoted career development and leadership, some interviewees felt that they had received only little or no support. The lack of support was therefore perceived as a challenge. For example, Interviewees 1 and 3 said that they have not received support from their families. Interviewee 3 said that the only support she has received was the training programme for young women with disabilities organized by the ADF, which she had found very useful. Interviewee 4 saw that there are many challenges in terms of public prejudices and sometimes a lot of persuasion is needed to get organizations to cooperate. In addition, the interviews highlighted the lack of accessibility and communication and information barriers.

Interviewee 7 talked about how a person with a disability often needs more time for daily activities compared to persons without a disability. Interviewee 2 talked about how she needed a personal assistant because of her disability but could not afford to hire one. The link between disability and poverty can increase the vulnerability of households, and additional costs may arise, for example expenditure that is necessary for the individual or household, such as health care, assistive devices, transport and personal care and assistance (Asumann 2021, 642). Such additional expenditure limits household spending on goods and services that would improve household well-being (ibid).

Interviewee 1 talked about how it is difficult to find support, such as mentors, especially for young women aspiring to become leaders, in the early stages of their career or when setting up an organization, for example. She saw that support is available once the organization is more established. Interviewee 1 thought that it would be ideal if more experienced leaders and established organizations could act as mentors for young leaders. Interviewees 1 and 2 both saw the importance of developing tailor-made mentoring programmes for women. Interviewee 6 also spoke about the importance of mentoring and training. She saw that young women face many difficulties in their work as leaders and therefore it would be important to have support from more experienced leaders to overcome them. Her experience was that she had received support from her family and friends, but little from the government.

“So of course there is the additional hard work that you will have to do more than what other women will do but be ready for it so that when that time comes you are able to use... you know the commitment and the hard work to get to higher grounds because nothing is for free.” (Interviewee 6).

One point that came up in the interviews was the experience that sometimes there is jealousy and competition among women. Interviewee 1 talked about how she feels this is more typical for women than for men. In her experience, men are more supportive of their colleagues and offer mentoring to junior managers.

“I feel like we need more networks we need to connect more. Because we are actually doing almost the same work, we just don't connect. I feel like there more need to kind of build more networks for women. Especially women with disabilities in leadership. And even just learn how we can interact, how we can walk together without feeling like we are stealing the light from the other person. [...] I feel like men are out here reaching out other people grow small initiatives. I find that men lead organisations are supporting other organisation or they are mentoring other people. But when the organisation is women led, it just me and my organisation.. you get that wall.. they are not willing to mentor other people... to help other people grow.” (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 8 raised a similar observation. In her experience, men support each other more, while women may even push each other down.

“More men with disabilities are the ones driving the front seats while the women are holding second positions or low positions. In the disability movement, you find that, sometimes the women themselves pull down their fellow women instead of supporting them to climb ladders. Sad to note, in the women with disability-led organizations, highly educated women are not given positions to take executive positions sometimes the women apply but they have in most cases been dropped during the recruitment process, which leaves a big gap.” (Interviewee 8)

There is little research on competition between women in organisations in the African context. A study by Titi Amayah & Haque (2017, 121), which collected data on the

experiences of women leaders in sub-Saharan Africa from articles printed in the media, raised the issue of Ghanaian women's experience of the tendency for women to push each other down in organizational culture. According to Mavin et al (2014), the relationships between women in the organisational environment are not only contradictory and complex, but also poorly understood and this can limit and weaken women's progress. Sara Lowes (2021) lab study explored how matrilineal kinship systems and stress affect competitive preferences in Central African countries. The study found that women compete less than men, with 80% of men and 60% of women choosing to compete. No differences were found between matriarchal and patrilineal kinship when comparing the willingness to compete between the genders. Women who are under higher levels of stress during competition are less likely to choose to compete (Lowes, 2021). Kark et al. (2024) have written about competitive attitudes and behavior among women in organizations by combining research from different disciplines to provide a broader understanding of the prevalence, causes and dynamics of the phenomenon. The paper also took into account different intersectional groups. Kark et al. (2024) notes that women face conflicting expectations in the workplace. On the one hand, women are expected to adapt to a highly competitive work culture and compete for power, promotions and prestigious positions in the workplace. At the same time, however, women are expected to adapt to societal normative expectations that they should behave in a communal and cooperative manner. Interviewee 6 did not identify the competition as particularly significant among women, but spoke generally about her experience as a woman with disabilities as follows:

“You first of all as a woman with the disability your competing with men with disabilities, then you are competing with women and you are competing with a man and so you start from a point of you know marginalization as you climb up.”
(Interviewee 6)

The description of interviewee 6 illustrates well the importance of an intersectional feminist perspective in analyzing the experiences of women with disabilities. Interviewee 6's description of the competitive hierarchy reveals the lived reality of women with disabilities, who are multiply disadvantaged in relation to other groups, in this case compared to women without disabilities (who might experience

discrimination based on their gender) and men with disabilities (who might experience discrimination based on their disability).

4.2.5 Ableism

The data also revealed the ableist attitudes that women leaders with disabilities face in their work. Interviewee 5 talked about how society is still influenced by the charity-based model and how disability is not a charity issue but an important part of the development agenda. Interviewee 4 also talked about the influence of the charity-based model behind the motivation of people to participate in events or to cooperate. In her experience, there are still many people who feel compassion for people with disabilities and this charity-based thinking underlies their actions. Interviewee 4 stressed that education people about these themes is still needed.

Although the problems with the medical and charity models have been discussed within the disability movement and academic disability studies, the debate has not permeated the wider social discourse. Moreover, the established position of medicine, particularly in Western and Western-colonized societies, maintains the persistence of the medical model (see Smart & Smart 2006, 30). Besides, the charity and medical model are closely linked to the history of colonialism and development assistance for people with disabilities has long been based on these models (see Kabzems & Chimedza, 2002). Development agencies have also been heavily influenced by donor countries' own agendas, whereby the desired impact of assistance has not been realized and the interests of local people with disabilities have not necessarily been considered (ibid). From a decolonial perspective, it can be argued that international actors have a responsibility to deconstruct these harmful discourses and recognize the central role of African women leaders with disabilities as actors and experts' part of the development cooperation.

Interviewee 1 said that her experience is that disability is often seen as the first thing about a person, rather than what you can do. People with disabilities are a very diverse minority group and particularly those with visible disabilities can feel that they are seen through their disability, for example wheelchair users have described such experiences (Galvin 2005). In addition, interviewee 1 spoke about

discrimination against people with disabilities within the disability movement. She said that there is no reasonable accommodation in her workplace, even though it is OPD. Another concern was the discrimination she experienced within a disability community. She said that she felt excluded and belittled because her disability was not visible. The phenomenon described by the interviewee has also been noted in the literature where studies can be found that there can be a hierarchy between disability groups (Banks & Mona 2007). The dynamics between inner and outer groups have been studied in the context of American disability activism and it has been found that discrimination and hierarchical systems can occur within the disability community. Hierarchical settings may be based on disability group or whether the disability was congenital or whether the person was disabled at some point in life. For example, physical disability was seen as a more legitimate form of disability than intellectual or mental disability (Banks & Mona, 2007).

Interviewee 3 talked about how she finds it problematic that the general assumption is that a person with disabilities wants to work in some way in the disability field or in OPDs. In addition to that, it is also assumed that person with disabilities need to be interested in and knowledgeable about disability inclusion and diversity. Interviewee 3 said that her own career aspirations were related to other themes. According to interviewee 3, as a result, people with disabilities are rarely seen in other spaces than disability-related positions and this negatively affects motivation to pursue a career outside the disability movement.

“When you are person with disabilities, you are expected to pursue the career that is disability related. And it’s a.. I don’t know it’s a so much for a struggle for me. Because I mean, I am quite confident, and I know what I want. [...] I’m particularly focused on which career I want to pursue. I notice that, everybody.. most people I talked to, sort of expect that I’ll pursue the career with.. which is disability related. [...] Because you are a person with disability you are, they.. you are presumed, it is assumed that you should know about diversity, disability inclusion, it’s obvious you have to pursue the career in that space. And.. It’s actually wrong.. Because me for instance I didn’t know much about those things, before joining this one (ADF training programme). I know the basic things that I have to do, as a person with disabilities, as someone who is always fighting for inclusion, I know basic things.

But because I didn't have intention to pursue the career in that space, I didn't go into much details in those things.” (Interviewee 3).

This experience of interviewee 3 illustrates the impact of ableist thinking and how disability is seen as central to a person's identity. In reality, people with disabilities can have very different experiences of their own disability identity and a wide range of interests that are not necessarily related to disability or issues of diversity and equality. If we look at interviewee 3's experiences from a decolonial perspective, we can see that different power relations and the idea of a hierarchy of knowledge influence the interviewee's experiences (see Nguyen 2023, 109). According to Nguyen (2023), Western approaches to disability reinforce colonialism by applying the same concepts and theories uncritically to colonised spaces. While disability discourses in the Global North focus on disability, citizenship, representation and identity, the global North frames disability discourse in the global South through discourses of poverty, development and inclusive practices. This is relevant because much of what is the dominant discourse on disability in the Global South is influenced by the Global North. The voices of persons with disabilities in the Global South have mostly been suppressed and their actions and agency have generally been excluded from the planning and implementation of research. Moreover, their stories are only of interest when they represent what Western intellectuals value, such as human rights and democracy (Nguyen 2023). Against this background, it seems that interviewee 3's experiences of being externally defined as to what kind of career she should be interested in as a person with disabilities are linked to wider power structures and the disability discourse in the global South framed by the global North, which emphasises the idea that to be a 'good' person with disabilities, one must be interested in inclusion and equality and pursue a career in that very field.

Interviewee 4 describes how people with disabilities are often seen as incapable of making independent decisions. This is why they are also seen as incapable of leadership roles, where decisions should be made on behalf of others. She felt that this is a big challenge, especially for women with disabilities. As outlined in previous research, women with disabilities are subject to stereotypes and their capacity for independent decision-making is often questioned (see Muthukhrisna et al., 2009). Similar to interviewee 3's experience, interviewee 4's description of how persons with

disabilities are seen as unable to make decisions can be interpreted as part of broader attitudes about who has knowledge and understanding and who is allowed to use it. Following Nguyen's (2023, 109) ideas, this can be seen as a hierarchy of knowledge.

When interviewees were asked what the biggest challenges for women's career development in the disability movement are, interviewees 4, 5 and 7 mentioned negative attitudes and prejudices in society and communities. Interviewee 7 talked about how an individual's abilities are hidden as a result of what society tells persons with disabilities about their abilities. Interviewee 7 saw society as "killing them softly without them knowing". In interviewee 8's experience, in organisations run by women with disabilities, highly qualified women are not given leadership positions. According to her, top positions are given to women without disabilities, while large number of women with disabilities hold the same positions for more than 10 years and are not considered for promotion based on experience. In addition, interviewee 8 mentioned that organisations may also have a large number of employees without disabilities. She also saw that as long as women with disabilities remain unemployed in their own organisations, other organisations cannot be expected to hire them. Interviewee 7 stressed that when opportunities to participate equally in social life are denied, it affects the personal development of the individual. Interviewee 7 shared her experiences from her working life and described her experience in her previous job. She had experienced that her work and achievements were not seen as a merit, but people thought that she had achieved things because she had been given privileges and favoured, because of her disability.

5 Discussion

When grouping the content analysis, I noticed that a large part of the codes could not be unambiguously grouped under one heading, but the same code could be placed in several groups. This was possibly related to the reason that the themes that emerged in the interviews were related to intersectional experience. For example, it was challenging to know whether the experience of discrimination at work or career development was due to disability, gender or both, if not specified by the interviewee. Banks and Mona (2007) have made a similar observation about the intersectional position of women with disabilities.

The theoretical framework of this thesis was quite broad, and although these theories were strongly intertwined, they were not separately analyzed. Intersectional feminism allowed for an examination of intersectional aspects, which was a key element in the experiences of women with disabilities. As the research focused on Africa and the experiences of a marginalized group of people, I see the inclusion of decolonial theory as essential. Decolonial theory is also a way of drawing attention to ethical issues, especially when research is conducted by the Global North on the experiences of people in the Global South (see Kiwan, 2022). In other words, decolonial theory is an important starting point in identifying and dismantling problematic power hierarchies.

I can see that structured individual interviews were an effective way of finding answers to the research questions of this study. Inductive content analysis was well suited to this study, as little previous research had been done on the topic (see Lauri & Kyngäs 2005). However, when doing the content analysis, I also found myself thinking about what kind of answers to the questions might have been obtained in a focus group interview, for example. In focus group interviews, different issues might come up because a shared discussion might generate different reflections in the interviewees. On the other hand, the individual interviews allowed for a calm and personalised interview situation, where it was possible to consider accessibility issues in a different way than in a group interview. In addition, a group interview would have been more challenging to conduct remotely.

Looking at the resources and challenges that emerged in the data and their meanings, we can find different coping strategies used by women with disabilities. Most of the interviewees raised experiences of discrimination and exclusion at some point in their lives, but these experiences were not necessarily directly labelled as discrimination. Also, many talked about how it had taken a lot of work to get to the point where they are now, and it has not been easy. The interviewees had individual ways of navigating their environment. Some interviewees highlighted the importance of positive thinking and self-confidence, or not wanting to pay attention to the negative. This can be seen as a coping mechanism and possibly also as a strategy to maintain leadership in the future. Some interviewees, on the other hand, spoke openly about their own traumatic experiences and the injustice they had faced. Some interviewees spoke more from an expert role, emphasizing the needs of the disability community and women in general rather than from their own experience and feelings.

Although there were also similarities between the interviews and certain themes emerged in more than one interview, there were also some divergences in the answers. As Titi Amayah and Haque (2017) point out, differences in experiences between African women are influenced by a variety of factors such as geographical location and regional history, as well as class, race, ethnicity and cultural background. The geographical scope of the study posed its own challenges to the analysis, as the interviewees were from different countries and different historical and cultural contexts. As the researchers have pointed out, it would be important to consider the heterogeneity of African women with disabilities (Hassanein, 2015, 1-4; Pikramenou & Mahajan, 2019). While recognising the diversity of African women with disabilities, I am aware that a broad scope also imposes limitations on research. Given the extent of the cultural and historical context in the data, there may be gaps in how cultural factors are interpreted in this study. In addition, from the position of a white European woman without disabilities, there may be gaps in the understanding of intersectional experiences of gender and disability. A more in-depth discussion of the impact of African colonial history on the cultural norms and practices of different states has not been possible in this study due to the geographical scope of the data. On the other hand, the need expressed by the African Disability Forum (ADF) to research this very topic and their request to me to interview women leaders with disabilities from different African countries supports the idea that there is a lack of

research on this topic and that there is also a need for information from the wider African continent within the African disability movement.

6 Conclusion

In this conclusion, I summarize the 1) resources and 2) challenges that emerged from this research, as expressed by women leaders with disabilities. The data revealed a wide range of resources and challenges that African women leader with disabilities face in their work. The strengths of women with disabilities in leadership were inner qualities and motivational factors such as self-esteem, self-confidence and consistency, spirituality, servant leadership and ubuntu values. Another clear resource was mentoring and support from family, friends, colleagues and society, as well as training and education. Similarly, lack of support, mentoring and training was perceived as a challenge. Challenges related to the leadership of women with disabilities were more prominent. In addition to lack of support, training and accessibility, gender-based violence, patriarchal structures, socio-economic environment and ableism were identified as challenges. The results of the study were well aligned with previous research on the experiences of women with disabilities in leadership positions (see Majiet & Africa, 2015; King et al. 2023a; King et. al. 2023b). On the other hand, the limited number of comparable studies (on the experiences of African women with disabilities specifically related to leadership in organizational settings) confirmed the need for more academic research on this topic. The sample of this study does not allow generalizations to be made about the experiences of women leaders with disabilities in relation to leadership in the African context.

Future research could explore in more detail the experiences of women with disabilities in different African countries. The impact of gender on leadership in women with disabilities is a topic that would be interesting to explore further. The competitive behaviour between women was theme that emerged in the data, but little research could be found on this in the African leadership context. Further research on ubuntu values and servant leadership could also be important, as the understanding of these themes in this study may be lacking when the analysis is conducted by a white Western woman from outside Africa.

As the central idea for change in SDG is "leave no one behind" (UN, 2015), it would be important to have more research on the experiences of women leaders with disabilities to better identify the needs of this intersectional group of people. I argue

that development discourse should better understand the central role and potential of OPDs in disability mainstreaming (see Veen et al., 2013, 365), and the expertise of women leaders with disabilities in development issues that are intrinsically linked to the activities and objectives of OPDs (see Katsui, 2023). Furthermore, it is important to recognize the gendered inequalities in leadership, as the OPDs are traditionally male led (see Miles, 1996). As Majiet & Africa (2015, 104) point out, leadership development for women with disabilities is a complex process in which understanding the impact of gender and disability need to be multi-layered. According to Majiet and Africa (2015), complexity is essentially about changing power relations and leadership in OPDs.

I argue that it would be important to deconstruct ableist structures and shift public perceptions and attitudes towards thinking that persons with disabilities have equal access to decision-making positions and positions of power that have historically and continue to be concentrated among white, able-bodied and cis, heterosexual men. If the people in power are not made up of a diverse group, intersectional groups such as women with disabilities are less likely to have their rights realized.

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Appendix

Interview questions:

1. How long have you been working in OPD? What kind of positions?
2. What factors have made it possible to take the leader position? What has contributed to success?
3. What is your education?
4. What role does education play in your life to achieve a leadership position?
5. Does your organization have a Gender Policy?
6. What are the biggest challenges for career development within the Disability Movement for women? What are the biggest obstacles?
7. What is needed to strengthen the inclusion of women with disabilities in the disability movement?
8. What can be done to give women with disabilities a better chance to start their own organizations?
9. Have you experienced discrimination? What kind of discrimination?
10. Do women leaders network with each other? For example, WhatsApp groups or other informal networks? If so, what?
11. What kinds of issues should be developed, that women with disabilities would be better able to advance to leadership roles?
12. What kind of support have you received in relation to the leadership? For example, from the organization, colleagues, society, family? What kind of support would you wish for?
13. What would be the most important factor that you have learned that you would like to share with young women with disabilities?