

**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORKS**

**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHALLENGE-RELATED LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
FEMALE STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION
THE CASE OF ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY**

By: Tilahun Kifle

Advisor: Dr. Asmamaw G/Egziabher

June, 2017

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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Tilahun Kifle

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work, in the Graduate Program at Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Tilahun Kifle

Signature

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By Tilahun Kifle

Approved by Board of Examiners

Chairman, Department of Graduate Committee

Signature

Advisor

Signature

External Examiner

Signature

Internal Examiner

Signature

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAU	Addis Ababa University
CDHE	Change and Development on Higher Education
ECDD	Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development
ENAB	Ethiopian National Association of Blind
ENHPC	Ethiopian National Housing and Population Census
FMH	Federal Ministry of Health
FSwVI	Female Students with Visual Impairment
GCS	German Church School
GO	Gender Office
HOPD	Humanitarian Organization working on/for People with Disabilities
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
JAWS	Job Access with Speech
KUC	Kotebe University College
MSwVI	Male Students with Visual Impairment
NG	No Grade
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPAPD	National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities
NVDA	Non-Visual Desktop Access
PDF	Portable Document Format
SNSO	Special Needs Support Office
SP	Study Participants
SSSB	Sebeta Special School of the Blind
ToT	Training of Trainers
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
WB	World Bank

Abstract

The aim of this study was to describe the lived experiences of female students with visual impairment who failed to continue (dropped out) their education at Addis Ababa University (AAU) because of various challenges. I conducted in-depth individual interviews with 7 participants and data were analyzed according to the principles of the descriptive phenomenological approach. Participants described the challenges they experienced in relation to academic and social aspect which includes the hardship of the transition period, the university environment, the risk factors and their coping mechanisms.

The study participants discussed also about their preference and level of social interactions with in-group and out-group peers. The findings revealed that in addition to the typical demands of university studies, the participants also took a lot of responsibility upon themselves to manage their studies and their physical and social environment. Though participants struggled a lot to maintain their position in the university, yet the effort sometimes drained their energy and left them frustrated and hopeless. Despite valuable steps towards inclusion in Ethiopia, the study participants' experience might be taken as indicator that the full participation of visually impaired female students seems to be not realized in the tertiary educational level.

Chapter One

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Ethiopia has developed a plan called NPAPD that stays from 2012-2021. This plan intends to address the needs of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia for comprehensive rehabilitation services, equal opportunities for education, skills training and work, as well as full participation in the life of the families, communities and the nation as a whole. In short, this plan aims at making Ethiopia an inclusive society. But the key question is what do we mean by inclusive society and how can we achieve it? An inclusive society is a society that over-rides differences of race, gender, class, generation, and geography, and ensures inclusion, equality of opportunity as well as capability of all members of the society to determine an agreed set of social institutions that govern social interaction (Charles, 1998). For instance, in an inclusive society, visual impairment does not prevent one from pursuing high goals of his/her life. Thus, every society need to be inclusive as it is a vital need of modern life. Nonetheless, there might be many hurdles for achieving this goal; however, it does not mean that we should not work towards achieving it.

When the word society is used, we automatically think of family, neighbors, playground, school/university, and work environment. In non-inclusive societies, each component creates certain problems for persons with disabilities. Families don't tell others about their new child's impairment for long time because they feel embarrassed for having such a child. When the child grows and wants to go out of house for meeting and playing with other children, family does not leave him/her to go outside, most likely because of the same reason,

embarrassment. So these children with disabilities grow in limited, and usually, in bitter environment. Even if these children go out for playing, they are mistreated by other children in the out-of-family environment which encourages them to stay at house.

This study selects one of the major kinds of impairments, visual impairment. It is considered as a major type of impairment as significant number of people experience the problem (nearly 4 million people based on 2006 study by the FMH). In most cases, families of children with disability do not allow their children to go to schools with an assumption that they can't manage to go alone. If their school attendance is a must, other family members without disabilities should take this child to school always which is almost impossible. Hence, illiteracy rate is too high among persons with disabilities in Ethiopia. According to the 2007 report from the Federal Ministry of Education, only 4% of persons with disabilities are in school in our country.

This problem gets more serious when the person is female and visually impaired. Visually impaired females are kept away from schools, social gatherings, and work opportunities because of ill-custom which does not allow women to go out of houses alone, especially in rural areas. They lead a dependent life since they do not know ways of living. Females with visual impairments face number of challenges because of their disability and womanhood. The two "minority" identities are double dose of barriers to achieve their life goals. Challenges start from first day of the problem and last for lifetime. The reasons behind all these challenges and problems might be low level of education, less or no awareness towards impairment, number of ill-customs and traditions, and poor economic condition.

When we come to higher education setting, students with visual impairment in general and females in particular face additional obstacles in higher education because of the reluctance of the institutions to provide accessible environment and suitable teaching materials (ENAB, 2016). Based on report from the Inclusive Education Department of Ethiopian National Association of the Blind (ENAB, 2016), the average number of students with visual impairment enrolled at AAU in each academic year from 2013 to 2015 is 110 out of which 48 were females. The report also revealed that the dropout percentage of MSwVI is relatively lower than FSwVI in the last three consecutive academic years. Besides, the percentage remains almost similar in the three consecutive years for MSwVI (3.2%, 4.8% and 3.2%) while it is increasing in the case of FSwVI (6.3%, 8.3% and 10.4%) of Addis Ababa University (AAU) in 2013, 2014 and 2015 academic year respectively.

Data regarding the challenge related lived experience of FSwVI of higher education is very scanty. It is hard to find out a specific research that pays attention at the challenges that stops female students with visual impairment from completing higher education successfully. Therefore, this study intends to examine the lived challenge-related experience of FSwVI who dropped out from AAU within the last three academic years using phenomenological research method. The challenges were described from the perspective of the students' subjective point of view, using in-depth reference to social and academic factors.

1.2 Statement of the problem

People with visual impairment are extremely disadvantaged in the pursuit of education in particular and all social services in general. Within the educational system they have to rely on the assistance of classmates and friends in the learning process. Books and other reading

materials in Braille are very rare, and when available they are of bad quality or out dated and with restricted mobility. Female with visual impairment live with two minorities identities “impairment” and “womanhood”, a double dose of discrimination and stereotyping and multiple barriers to achieve their life goals. Their struggles remain on the margins of social justice movements that should represent them (Waxman and Wolfe, 1999). They experience double discrimination, which places them at higher risk of gender-based violence, sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation (UN, 2010). As the UN report (2009) observes, women with disabilities are often poor and/or face various forms of challenges unknown to most people. Wherever discrimination occurs, they often experience further prejudice, based on common assumptions and widely held beliefs about their status and capacity both as females and as person with visual impairment. According to UNESCO (2010) female students with disabilities face architectural, transportation, attitudinal, pedagogical and policy barriers as they attempt to take on their social and educational scene.

There are number of challenges in higher education that are significant enough to hold visually impaired female students back from successful completion of their education (Dawit Tessentu, 2014). Despite some helpful laws, policies and systems of practice in the country, compared to their visually impaired male and sighted female peers, female students with visual impairment experience more challenges in their pursuit of education and consequently are more likely to terminate their school (ENAB, 2016). According to Dawit (2014) it is possible to conclude that students with disabilities still face substantial amounts of barrier in higher education institutions. Students with disabilities in Ethiopia continue to experience constraints in participating in postsecondary education. These constraints to educational achievement have subsequent implications on the individual development of students with

disabilities in general and female students with disabilities in particular (Dawit Tessentu, 2014).

1.3 General objective of the study

The major objective of this research is to describe the challenge-related lived experiences of female students with visual impairment who dropped out of AAU. It focuses on academic and social aspects of challenges that hamper the successful completion of their education.

1.4 Specific objective of the study

This study has four specific objectives;

- To identify the risk factors that hold university female students with visual impairment back from the successful completion of their education.
- To identify types of challenges faced by female students with visual impairment.
- To examine the participants' perception of accountability to the existed challenges.
- To identify the available resources, support systems, and services specifically designed for female students with visual impairment so as to meet their special needs.

1.5 Research question

The study will try to describe the lived experiences of female students with visual impairment in relation to academic and social challenges they faced in the pursuit of their higher education. The central question of the study was: What is the challenge related lived

experience of female students with visual impairment who failed to overcome the challenges and dropped out of higher education? The sub-questions are:

- What are the risk factors that hold university female students with visual impairment back from the successful completion of their education?
- What types of challenges were hindered female students with visual impairment?
- What is the perception of female students with visual impairment about the accountability issue for the challenges?
- What resources, support systems, and services are available so as to meet their special needs?

1.6 Significance of the study

This study strives to uncover specifically the challenges of female students with visual impairment. The finding of this study is expected to be useful by enriching the existing knowledge by bringing additional perspective (insight) towards this specific situation. And, this new insight will help governmental and non-governmental actors designing intervention program so as to reduce the magnitude of the problem. The importance of this study is in focusing the attention of the academic system on the needs of students with visual impairment and can be made of this information in order to help these students in their academic journey. The study aims to raise awareness of how female students with visual impairment experience academic and social challenges in higher education.

1.7 Justification

This study is intended to be concentrated on specific impairment and gender; which is on female and visual impairment. A sharp focus on single impairment, like visual impairment, is important, since the barriers and needs of students might differ across disabilities (Alqaryouti, 2010). Given this fact, it is perhaps more desirable to have an in-depth focus on one impairment with its varying range of experiences and realities, rather than having the potentially confusing task of listening to various voices from a diverse range of disabilities. The same is true for gender issues. The needs, challenges, and motives of female and male students are quite different. In summary, there are limited researches regarding the lived experiences of visually impaired female students in Ethiopia. Hence I believed this research is essential to pinpoint areas for change and, simultaneously, to highlight effective practice.

1.8 Limitations

One of the limitations of this study might be related to the research design. The study is conducted by deploying only qualitative research design and hence it might be limited in describing magnitudes in a quantitative ways. Another limitation in this study might lie in the fact that qualitative reports are more likely to run a risk of misrepresentation of certain aspects of reality because of the potentially large variances between participants' and researchers' points of view, between lived and narrated lives, and between the existed reality and presentations of reality. To deal with this limitation, the findings were provided to the participants after analysis if it had complied or refuted to what they have said. Besides, the document was also given to key informants so that they can evaluate the degree of personal bias.

Chapter Two

2. Review of the Related Literature

The UNCRPD which came into force in 2008 states that person with disabilities have the right to participate in all development programs (UNCRPD, 2008). This convention has brought a new attention to enhance the lives of persons with disabilities in many aspects including the access of education. Although there is increased access to higher education globally, disadvantaged groups including female students with disabilities have been continually neglected as their educational needs has been unnoticed (NDA, 2004). The evidence drawn on by Stubbs and Tawake (2009) revealed that, despite some helpful laws, policies and systems of practice in some countries, compared to male with disabilities or able bodied female peers, women with disabilities are less educated; experience higher rates of unemployment; are more likely to be abused; are poorer; are more isolated; experience worse health outcomes and generally have lower social status.

With the intention of finding solutions to the challenges of higher education accessibility and to launch a process of profound reform of higher education, UNESCO has published a policy paper on change and development on higher education (CDHE) that states no discrimination can be accepted in granting higher education on grounds of race, gender, language or religion, or economic, cultural or social distinctions, or disability (UNESCO, 1995). Besides, the UDHR 1948 Article 3a states that admission to higher education should be based on merit, capacity, efforts, perseverance and devotion, showed by those seeking access. However, the contents of this article have not clearly been implemented in higher institutions in many countries including Ethiopia so as to meet the needs of female students

with disabilities (UN 2010). The UN report (2010) indicates that available data, mostly focused on educational achievements, indicate that female students with disabilities are less well in the higher educational arena than both male with disabilities and female without disabilities. This finding proves that higher educational needs of female students with disabilities have yet to be taken into account by those who work to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, as well as those who work in the field of disability.

2.1 Understanding the concept of disability

Disability is an old age phenomenon in the history of human societies. It is often associated with various misconceptions and attitudes in different societies. Globally, persons with disabilities have been attached to loaded terms like 'evil spirit', 'witch craft', 'ill' and 'unfortunate' (Daniel, 2000). Disability has different views to define the concept. The charity model of disability regards people with disabilities as 'unfortunate', 'tragic' or 'helpless' people who deserve pity and charity (Daniel, 2000). To providing supports such as food or clothing for people with disabilities is the focus on such model. This model considers people with disabilities as long term recipients of support and welfare.

Daniel (2000) identify the other model which is the medical model that perceives disability as a problem located in the individual with disability, and assumes that working to 'fix' or 'cure' individual can solve it. This model largely replaces and in effect extends the charity model. According to Daniel (2000) it has its origin in biomedical understanding of impairments; hence disability is visually seen as lack of competence, due to dysfunction in an individual mind and body. Both the charity and medical model perceive disability as a problem located in the individual with disability (Daniel, 2000) .

The true nature of disability is neither an individual's mere functional limitations nor the difficulties of performance which arise from such limitations. But it is operation, discrimination, social exclusion and the restriction of participation. This view of disability as a social construct is called the social model of disability. This perception removes the focus from the individual with disability as being the problem and shifts the responsibility on to society to remove the barriers which prevent full inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. The UNCRPD (2006) defines disability as follows "Those who have long term physical mental and intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder the full and effective participation in society in an equal basis with others.

2.2 Prevalence of disability

According to the 2011 report of WHO and WB on disability, about 15% of the world's population experiences a disability at some time in their lives. This means that approximately one billion persons around the world are persons with disabilities. The WHO report on disability also estimates that 37 million people are blind and 124 million people have low vision worldwide. Most persons with disabilities live in developing nations, and are among the poorest persons in the world.

When we come to Ethiopia, there is high data confusion about the number and status of persons with disabilities. The population and housing census of Ethiopia (2007) revealed that the total number of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia is 805,535 which is only 1.1% of the then total number of population of the country (73,891, 095). However, this figure is agreed to be very low by actors in the field. On the other hand, based on the National Survey on

Blindness, Low Vision and Trachoma in Ethiopia, there are about 1.2 million blind people, and 2.8 million people with low vision (Federal Ministry of Health of Ethiopia, 2006).

2.3 Definitions of blindness and visual impairment

The dictionary definition places blindness at the end of a continuous line which begins with proper sight. Its meaning is inability to receive light. Visual impairment relates to an injury to the eye or a neural injury in the visual system which cannot be fixed/ repaired by glasses or regular optic aids. This impairment limits the individual's ability to recognize or see details in a sharp and accurate way from a defined distance. A functional / rehabilitative point of view sees a person who use hearing and touch senses instead of sight in everyday life, or uses assistive aids (for example: Braille, a cane) as an alternative to seeing is defined as visually impaired / blind. The legal definition of blindness (ICD, 2006) defines as blind a person who has one of these three limitations:

- Complete loss of vision
- Acuity of not greater than 3/60 in the better eye with correction (with glasses on).

This means a person who cannot count fingers presented at a distance of three meters in front of her/him.

- A field not subtending an angle greater than 20 degrees (in the better eye).

Admission of a “blind / low vision certificate” is based on the functionality of the vision that remains for occupation, learning, mobility etc. This certificate provides rights such as certain services and a tuition exemption at higher education institutions. All the participants in this study are defined as legally blind by the criteria presented above by government owned hospitals.

It is important to clarify the distinction between disability and impairment. As mentioned above, impairment is the physical fact of lack of vision. Disability is the social process in which the impairment cause negative implications to the individual due to barriers to access (Davis, 2006). For example: blind students have impairments that limit vision, but are not disabled unless their learning materials are not accessible. This research refers to the participants as students with visual impairment.

2.4 Classification of visual function

According to the international classification of disease by International Classification of Disability (WHO) there are 4 levels of visual function.

- Normal vision
- Moderate visual impairment
- Severe visual impairment
- Blindness

Moderate visual impairment combined with severe visual impairment is grouped under the term “low vision”: low vision taken together with blindness represents all visual impairment (WHO 2006).

2.5 The causes of visual impairment

Globally the three major causes of visual impairment are:

- Uncorrected refractive errors (myopia, hyperopia or astigmatism), 43 %
- Un operated cataract, 33%
- Glaucoma, 2% (WHO 2006)

2.6 Higher education and people with visual impairment

Figures concerning comparative numbers of people in employment and education show that people with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged groups around the world (Giddens, 2006). Higher education plays an important role in preparing one for adult life, both as professional training and as a mechanism of social motivation and socialization (Avrahami, 1997). Today it is known that high school graduation is not enough to prepare adults with disabilities for economic and social independence. People with disabilities are still behind the non-disabled population in almost every indicator of economic activity (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). This indicates the importance of higher education for persons with disabilities in general and of with visual impairment in particular. However, in spite of this fact, the number of female university students with visual impairment is still low and they have to face many difficulties during their study.

Visually impaired students in higher education commonly have to overcome numerous obstacles along the way (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). According to Fuller, these challenges include, amongst others, difficulty to access course material, inaccessible teaching methods and negative attitudes from peers. It therefore comes as no surprise that disabled students, including those students with a visual impairment, are at a higher risk of leaving the tertiary institution prematurely compared to their non-disabled peers (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). Even though engaging in tertiary education can thus improve the lives of disabled students in very significant ways, barriers may prevent them from reaching their goals and developing their full potential.

When we see the case of Addis Ababa University, students with visual impairment in general and females in particular face additional obstacles because of the inaccessible environment and unsuitable teaching materials (ENAB, 2016). Based on report from the Inclusive Education Department of Ethiopian National Association of the Blind (ENAB, 2016), the average number of students with visual impairment enrolled at Addis Ababa University in each academic year from 2013 to 2015 is 110 out of which only 48 of them were females. According to the study by the inclusive department of ENAB, most of these female students have academic and social difficulties and have to develop their own ways, methods and skills to adjust to university. Many of them discover that they do not have the learning skills necessary to meet academic demands. Some of them choose the so-called book science; or have to repeat some courses several times or forced to lengthen the period of learning in the university for additional years (ENAB, 2016).

2.7 Accessibility and higher education institutions in Ethiopia

A study by UNESCO (1997) on students with disabilities at universities in Africa with the main objectives of gathering information on the situation of students with disabilities in African universities describes that the majority of participating universities have little or no facility for students with disabilities. For example AAU which was one of the participant universities from Ethiopia had minimal provision for students with disabilities at that time (UNESCO 1997, Dawit 2014). A recent study by Yared (2008) and ILO (2011) describes some of the major barriers faced by students with disabilities include: physical inaccessibility, shortage of equipment, lack of elevator, lack of personal assistant, lack of sign language interpreter, lack of educational equipment such as Braille paper. The study also revealed that the faculty member and other academic staffs are unaware of disability need

and support. According to the findings of UNESCO (1997 and 1999), AAU did not have any distinct policy with regard to students with disabilities though students with disabilities had very minimal provisions. The higher education proclamation No.650/2009 article 40 of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, declares that Institutions shall make, to the extent possible, their facilities and programs adaptable to use with relative ease by physically challenged students.

2.8 Dimensions of adjustment to the higher education system

While attending higher education, students have to face many new and complicated tasks, not just academic and social but also personal. These might be perceived as threatening for a new student, and these tasks demand adjustment to new and varied experiences (Mechanic, 1962). Levi (2002) divided the process of adjustment to higher education system into five different dimensions: physical adjustment, constitutional adjustment, academic adjustment, social adjustment, and natural adjustment.

2.8.1. Academic adjustment

Being a student is a very demanding task which requires adjustment to brand new experiences. Academic adjustment is a process that is influenced by many factors including personal, familial and social as well as cognitive, intelligence and academic competence (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Besides the challenges that every student faces, female students with visual impairment have many more, such as learning orientation to the new place and creating a support network. This model demonstrates that varied and multiple variables affect academic adjustment and success. A variable like visual impairment might be included in each of the factors because of its broad effect on the individual. Visual

impairment is a background variable but it definitely affects the individual's data and can also act as an environmental variable when interpreted as disability in its social context. A few studies have investigated aspects of the functioning of university students with visual impairment and the following main difficulties were found:

- i. Accessible learning materials - Visually impaired graduates reported that their main problem was finding accessible learning materials (for example: Braille booklets), finding learning materials and using the library (Berman & Naon, 2004).
- ii. Reading and understanding learning materials - Even if the student acquired good learning habits during high school, academic demands in university are different (the amount of learning materials, learning and teaching methods etc.). While in high school learning is based mostly on alternative learning instruments (like touching / sensing), studying in university is mostly based on information received by the auditory channel, and therefore requires different preparations technically and cognitively (Faraj, 2005).
- iii. Lengthening of the time dedicated to learning due to impairment - For students with visual impairment it takes longer time than for a sighted student to learn the same amount of course material. The more severe the impairment, the longer time it takes (Meister, 1998).

2.8.2. Social adjustment

In addition to academic adjustment, another critical factor which is related to persistence and success in university is social adjustment ability (Gerdes & Malinckrodt, 1994).

Integration into the social environment was found to be an essential factor which influences

one's commitment to the academic system. Lack of social integration might be one of the factors that relates to dropping out of university and not finishing the degree (Hodges & Keller, 1997). McBroom (1997) reported that senior students and graduates with visual impairment indicated eleven factors related to their academic success. Five of the factors concerned social interaction: contact with peers and professors, assertiveness, advocacy and independence, extracurricular activities and social networks, transportation and orientation and mobility skills.

Students with visual impairment have many difficulties in the social – emotional field. Many skills which are necessary for social interaction are based on visual cues. Loss of sight influences the ability to recognize people or social situations (French, 1999). The lack of visual input makes it hard to recognize actions and emotions of the other and sometime mediation or interpretation is required (Rosenblum, 1997). The visual lack may cause a deficit in development of social skills and social rejection (George & Duquette, 2006). The following factors about social adjustment and functioning of students with visual impairment were found:

- i. Social rejection and social isolation - Persons with visual impairment often receive hostile and inappropriate behavior from their surroundings. In addition, they have fewer social experiences compared to their sighted peers (Beaty, 1994). French (1999) describes feelings of isolation, difference and shame which occur in everyday life conflicts, but also lack of acceptance by sighted people. Students with visual impairment lack confidence, expressed through patterns of passivity, dependence or an unwillingness to take responsibility (Gurb, 2000). Even when high school students with visual impairment are included in a regular class this does

- not necessarily help them to interact with their sighted peers. Many of them still suffer from social isolation, fewer friends and inadequate social abilities (George & Duquette, 2006; Huurree & Komulaine, 1999).
- ii. Less time for leisure activities - Depending on the type and severity of the impairment, these students required two to five times as much time to learn the syllabus and to prepare and revise lectures than did their non-disabled peers. Because of this extra effort, they also reported having less time for leisure activities (Meister, 1998). Students with visual impairment in their first year of studying reported less social integration and participation in social activities than students in later years (Faraj, 2005).
 - iii. Lack of social skills - Many youths with visual impairment experience over-protective care from their parents, families and service providers. Therefore they do not develop the social skills that are required for integrating into campus life (McBroom, Tedder & Kang, 1991). Students with visual impairment are sometimes insecure and ashamed and have a hard time starting a conversation with others. This might lead to an uncomfortable situation when it comes to asking for help and might affect their performance of academic tasks (Vancil, 1997).

Lack of acceptance and personal difficulties - Visually impaired university graduates reported a feeling of being misunderstood and of non-acceptance of their disability by lecturers and university authorities (Berman & Naon, 2004).

2.9 Risk factors and coping mechanisms

According to McBroom (1997), risk occurs when an individual experiences a threat to satisfying basic human needs (physical safety, sense of self-worth, efficacy, and belonging to a positive social network). McBroom (2001) identified characteristics, traits, and experiences that may be risk factors that have the potential to impact an individual's development.

- i. Individual risk factors - This includes gender, race, history of medical problems, poor academic skills, low school attendance, low IQ, low levels of self-determination, poor social problem-solving skills, emotional problems, and stressful life events.
- ii. Family risk factors - This includes low socioeconomic status; inconsistent, harsh, and disorganized parenting style; family composition, family history of mental illness, and history of child maltreatment.
- iii. School risk factors - This includes poor quality of instruction, few opportunities for involvement in school activities, low levels of bonding to school, dangerous or unsafe school environment, and poor peer relationships.
- iv. Community risk factors - This includes few opportunities to participate in social activities; few viable employment opportunities and options; few opportunities to develop and sustain meaningful relationships with positive adult models; and high levels of crime, violence, and poverty.

Risks can be characterized at the individual level, the micro level (family and School) or the macro level (community and culture). At the individual level, risk is a transaction that occurs between the individual and the environment such as the acquisition of illness or disability. At the microsystem level, risk can be described as the conditions of family, school,

and peer networks such as the disruption that occurs from a family member having an accident or illness. At the macro level, risk can be described as cultural, community, and national conditions such as the degree to which discrimination against subgroups (such as people with disabilities) is practiced.

2.10 Conceptual frame work

Disability is something imposed on top of the physical impairments by the way society isolates and excludes those with disabilities from full participation in society (Hodges and Keller, 1997). In 1983, the disabled academic Mike Oliver coined the phrase "social model of disability" in reference to the ideological developments. He focused on the idea of an individual model versus a social model, derived from the distinction originally made between impairment and disability (Faraj, 2005). The social model theory argues that it is the society which disables persons with disabilities. Hodges and Keller, 1997 pointed out that the social model perspective turns the attention away from identifying people with disabilities to identifying and addressing the barriers in society that restrict their full participation in everyday life. Thus, from this perspective, disabling can be understood by focusing on the relationship between persons with impairment and the society or environment of which they are part. Therefore, the response to disability is the restructuring of society for it to be able to deal appropriately with people with disability.

In this paper an extended use will be made of the social model theory in its analysis of how the environment disables female students with visual impairment by the way they are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from access and full participation in higher education. The model draws attention to identifying and addressing the challenges of female students

with visual impairment in higher education institutions that restricts them from successful completion of their education. This implies that certain mechanisms need to be put in place to create an environment where female students with visual impairment can participate equally in the process of teaching and learning.

Social model of disability implies that the removal of attitudinal, physical and institutional barriers will improve the lives of disabled people, giving them the same opportunities as others on an equitable basis. Taken to its logical conclusion, social model serves as conceptual framework for this research to pay particular attention to participants' societal relationship, social capital, and the extent of their participation (social bond). Besides, this conceptual frame work plays a key role in exploring the lived experience of visually impaired female students who had dropped out of AAU because of undisclosed challenges so far.

This model has been criticized because it ignores or dismisses disease or injury as part of the picture, although such factors and their consequences may have a major role in the life of a person with a disability and may require intervention by health care providers at times. People with disabilities are encouraged to see any problems they encounter as emerging from barriers and negative attitudes of others in their social environment.

Chapter Three

3. Research Design And Methodology

This study employed qualitative research method as it tried to look at complex phenomena in-depth and textual data is needed to answer the research question. This method would be more helpful to produce comprehensive data on the difficulty of female students with visual impairment in the pursuit of higher education. The phenomenological approach is appropriate way to uncover participants' meanings of the challenges in their pursuit of higher education and brings out a deeper understanding of the situation (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Participant selection and size

Participants were approached and recruited in the study through their association, ENAB. ENAB provides support services for its visually impaired members and hence have a pool of students with visual impairment who have registered in order to get academic support and accommodations. To select participants in this study, the researcher applied purposive sampling technique. The rationale behind selecting purposive sampling is that it is the best way for obtaining the richest possible source of information to answer the research questions. Besides, this technique will be applied in order to meeting directly those female students with visual impairment and dropped out of the higher education due to multiple challenges. The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question (Creswell, 2014). Purposive sampling is one of sampling techniques in qualitative research that is deliberately made to select respondents based on their natural ability to give the required information (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (1998, p.64) recommends the sample size in a phenomenological study to be about five to twenty five while Morse (1994, p.225) suggests it to be at least six participants. A researcher can stop collecting data when the categories (or themes) are saturated and when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties (Davis, 2006). Therefore, seven visually impaired females, defined as legally blind and who dropped out of Addis Ababa University in those mentioned three academic years, were selected to participate in the study. Five of the students were total blind (four of them from birth) and the other two were partial blind. All of the participants were studying for their B.A.

3.2 Eligibility criteria

The three major criteria that make participants eligible to take part in this research are:-

- Being visually impaired,
- Being female and
- Being students of A.A.U and dropped out of school because of the challenges.

3.3 Data collection methods

Interviews are identified as the best tools used to generate data that are systematically analyzed to search for themes and patterns that illustrate similarities or differences and uncover the meaning of the particular experience in a phenomenological research (Creswell, 2014). Therefore; I employed face to face in-depth interviews with each study participant. The interview data were captured by audio tape recorder.

3.4 Instrument development

Since this descriptive phenomenological study was to figure out the lived experience of female students with visual impairment, an interview guide (Anex 2) that was amenable to change through the process was developed and I went to the field to learn from the experiences of the participants. The interview guide was developed by considering the research questions, previous literatures and anticipation of possible response participants may give. The development of interview guide depends on the research questions, the actual research situation and on what will work most effectively in that situation to give the researcher the data needed (Giorgi, 2009).

3.5 Data collection procedure

I had a preliminary meeting with each research participants prior to the interview a week before the actual interview. This preliminary meeting was an opportunity to establish trust with the participants, review ethical considerations and complete consent forms. During this initial meeting with the participants I discussed about the overall research questions that my study intends to answer and its purpose. I interviewed one participant per day and each interview took maximum of two hours duration depending on the participants' concentration and interest. Interviews can take one to two hours with each participant; alternatively, written descriptions can be gathered from participants, and these tend to be more concise (Giorgi, 2009). Each in-depth interview was started with general discussions of daily happenings so as to create rapport with the participants. I encouraged them to talk about their personal biographies and experiences to help them get some control over what was discussed. All interviews were tape recorded. The interviews took place in the compound of the ENAB.

This place was selected based on the participants' first choice. I observed that since all participants' are members of this association, they consider the place like their home and they feel safe to make themselves available. The interview was conducted in Amharic for the sake of fluent communication. Though participants were allowed to discuss their university life in general, particular attention were given to issues relating to choosing university and faculty; learning experiences; contact with tutors and lecturers; use of assistive technologies; contact with readers; orientation and mobility issues; accommodations; friendships and social interactions; perceptions of failure and success. The interview structure was flexible and dynamic that let the participants share their story in the way they wanted to do it. I tried not to interfere or give clear directions in order to allow participants to bring their personal narrative of being a female student with visual impairment. After the participants finished telling their story I went through the interview guide checking that all the topics that are mentioned there were discussed. The interview guide can be found in Annex 2. What I have kept in my mind during the interview was the argument of French (1999) that when interviewing a person with visual impairment or blindness, the interviewer must pay attention to the fact that people with visual impairment do not have access to non-verbal communication and thus rely mostly on the verbal communication.

3.6 Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations were applied to this study so as to address ethical issues. Participation in this study was completely on voluntary bases and all participants were provided the necessary information and asked their consent before they get involved in the study (See Annex -1). Before conducting the interview, I informed all participants what the purpose of the study is, what is needed from them, the duration of their engagement, rights of

participant, possible benefits of participants, and confidentiality of records. No participant was involved in this study against her will. Participants were also assured that their response will remain strictly confidential and personal details will be kept anonymous. The consent form was read aloud to each participant and finally, the participants showed their agreement by signing the consent form.

3.7 Data analysis

The first thing I did in the data analysis process was familiarizing myself with the collected data. This involves reading and re-reading the collected data. Make notes of thoughts that spring to my mind and write summaries of each transcript as the aim of conducting data analysis is to condense all of the data to key themes and topics that can shed light on the research question. I transcribed the recorded responses into written notes in Amharic and then translated into English for presentation purpose. After transcribing the voice recorded data into Amharic and then translated into English, those data with similar content were grouped under one theme because a thematic data analysis was applied in this study. Then the thematically organized data were discussed with the existing literature. In presenting the finding, I have tried to disclose the phenomenon as it was expressed by the participants.

3.8 Trust worthiness

Though according to Giorgi (2009) phenomenological research design by itself contributes toward truth since it presents the phenomenon as it is, I have communicated back the seven participants to validate that the study finding reflected their perspectives regarding the phenomenon so as to ensure the truthfulness of the study finding.

Chapter Four

4. Findings

This chapter presents the major findings that have emerged from the participants' experiences. It is organized under two main sections. The first section presented the background information of the participants. The second section attempted to address the research questions of this thesis and again it is subdivided into four sub-parts based on the specific objectives of the study. The first sub-part of the second section displayed the descriptions of the risk factors for the ineffectiveness of female students with visual impairment in higher education. The next part is the description of the magnitude and types of academic and social challenges experienced by female students with visual impairment. The third sub-part has examined the participants' perception as to who could be accountable for the significant dropout rate of female students with visual impairment. The final sub-part is concerned to obtain the level of awareness of the study participants about the available resources, support systems, and services that might have helped them complete their education successfully.

Since I have applied a heuristic phenomenology, the findings of the study are presented in a descriptive way. This descriptive way of presenting data was characterized by use of long, extended and direct quotes that will provide a clear picture without reduction of what the participants have said regarding their lived experience of the phenomenon.

4.1 Background of the research participants

Seven visually impaired female students who dropped out from AAU were selected and interviewed for this study. The participants' age ranged from 23 to 35 years. Six participants are engaged in very small scale trade to support their lives while only one of them is not involved in any form of income generating activities. Two of them were diagnosed with their visual impairment at birth while the other five participants were diagnosed at their early age. On the other hand, three of them are partially blind while the other four participants are totally blind. All of them were students of Addis Ababa University (AAU) enrolled in different social science fields at bachelor degree level. Though participants came from different parts of the country to continue their higher education at AAU, they prefer to remain in Addis Ababa after they dropped out of the university. Most of them reside in the same location called "Shiromeda" where the place is also preferred by many other of people with visual impairment to live. The participants varied in their age, level of impairment, field of education, social and academic skills.

Code Name	Sex	Age	Birth place	Field of study	Type of VI	Impairment onset Age
Participant one	F	30	Debark	Law	Partial blind	5 Years
Participant two	F	23	Dessie	Social Work	Partial blind	Birth
Participant three	F	26	Assela	Sociology	Total blind	3 years
Participant four	F	27	D/Markos	Law	Total blind	Birth
Participant five	F	27	Wolayita	History	Partial Blind	13 years
Participant six	F	35	Debrebirhan	Political Science	Total Blind	1 Years
Participant seven	F	24	Teji (Oromia)	Sociology	Total blind	6 years

Table 1 - Background information of participants

4.1.1. Participants' individual profile

i. Participant One

This participant is 30 years old and she was born in North Gondar zone of Amhara regional state in a special place called Debark. She has been diagnosed with low vision starting from age 5. She is the first child out of three children for her family and her parents and siblings live in her birth place. Her families are poor and she didn't get any support from them since she came to Addis Ababa when she was a kid. Her aunt brought her to Addis Ababa and let her join Sebeta Special School for the Blind (SSSB) found in Sebeta town 25km far from Addis Ababa. She entered into higher education from SSSB. However, she was forced to drop out of Addis Ababa University in 2015 while she was 2nd year Law student. Currently she is employed in one humanitarian organization as a sanitary worker to support her life. She is living in a rental with her girlfriend that is visually impaired too. She has no intention to continue her education because she believes that the challenges she already have experienced are still existed in higher education. Since she is partial sighted, she needs no mobility assistance.

ii. Participant Two

Participant two who was born in Dessie is 26 years old. She has been diagnosed with partial blindness since from her birth. She is the only girl out of the five children in her poor family. Her mother has passed away when she was kid and her father married another woman and still lives in her birth place with her four brothers. She entered into higher education from SSSB. However, she was forced to drop out of AAU in 2015 while she was a first year Social Work student. Currently she is living in Addis Ababa in the area of Shiromeda with

her elder brother who is the first child for the family and traditional weaver in his profession and she sells lottery ticket to support her life. She doesn't want to return back to her home town Dessie because she thinks that Addis Ababa is by far better than Dessie for educational opportunities. She wants to continue her education in the extension program in the near future if she gets the opportunity to be supported by humanitarian organizations.

iii. Participant Three

Participant three is 26 years old and born in Assela. She has been diagnosed with total blindness since she is 3 because of a smallpox disease. She attended her elementary school at Shashemene Special School for the Blind up to 6th grade. After completing her elementary school she came to Addis Ababa and joined German Church inclusive school and attended there 7th and 8th grade. She entered into higher education from mainstream school called Aste Minilik secondary and preparatory school. However, she was forced to drop out of Addis Ababa University in 2014/15 academic year while she was 2nd year Sociology student. Currently, she lives alone in a rental house around "Shiromeda" and this year, she started studying Civics at BA level in Kotebe Metropolitan University (KMU) in the extension program. She gets the financial income to cover her living expense and tuition fee from a humanitarian organization called "Together" that works on persons with disabilities in Addis Ababa.

iv. Participant Four

Participant four is 27 years old and born in Debre Markos, East Gojam zone of Amhara regional state. She has been diagnosed with total blindness since her birth. She is the seventh child out of eleven children for her family with whom she has lost communication for so long. She remembers her families were farmers. She never heard of her family since she

joined Special School for the Blind found in Shashemene at the age of 10. She was forced to drop out of AAU in 2014 while she was 2nd year Amharic student because of her unplanned pregnancy. Currently she is a mother of a three years old son and engages in lottery ticket selling business to support her life and her son living in a rental in Addis Ababa city in the area of Shiromeda. She has no intention at all to return back to her home town Debre Markos because she does not know her families address nor has any emotional attachment to both her families and to home town. She said there is no reason to go back to her home town. Besides, she thinks that living in Addis Ababa is by far better than living in Debre Markos for persons with disabilities. She doesn't have any plan to continue her education because she doesn't believe that she will get spare time to manage her school following her status of being a mother.

v. Participant Five

Participant five is 27 years old and born in Woliyta. She has been diagnosed with partial blindness at the age of 13. She doesn't know the status of her family since she left her family when she was a kid and even she doesn't remember them. As a child, she was taken to Addis Ababa and entered into "Kechene Childeren Care Center" and raised together with other orphans and vulnerable children like herself. She spent her elementary and secondary school in a mainstream school (Atse Minilik) and had an opportunity to join AAU in 2011/12. However, she was forced to drop out of AAU in 2012/13 academic year while she was 2nd year History student. After dropping out of AAU, she joined Kotebe Metropolitan University (KMU) and graduate in 2015/16 academic year with diploma in Civics. Her educational expenses were covered by Together, a humanitarian organization working on persons with disabilities. After her graduation from KUC, she took training of trainers (ToT)

on basic computer skills for the blind which was organized by Together and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skill of basic computer application programs especially for persons with visual impairment. Currently she is teaching basic computer skill for persons with visual impairment in “Entoto Amba” secondary school. She lives in a rental in Addis Ababa city in the area of Shiromeda.

vi. Participant Six

Participant six is 35 years old and born in Debrebirhan, North Shoa. She has been diagnosed with total blindness at the age of one because of the exposure to a strong light radiation. She entered into higher education from mainstream schools in Debrebirhan and she started selling lottery to support her life since she was high school student and also was living in a rental alone while she was high school student. She was forced to drop out of AAU in 2013/14 while she was 2nd year Political Science and International Relations student. This field of study was not her first choice; rather she was interested to study “Amharic Language and Literature”. She believed that one of the main reasons to be unsuccessful in AAU is that she didn’t like the field of study she was studying. Currently she engaged in the lottery selling business to support her living. Seeing her friends with visual impairment succeeding at KMU she is initiated to continue her higher education next year at KMU.

vii. Participant Seven

Participant seven is 24 years old and born in Oromia region special place called Teji. She has been diagnosed with total blindness since the age of two. She has been brought to Addis Ababa when she was a kid by her relatives and she still lives with them. Her families moved to Sebeta after she left them. She attended her elementary and secondary school in mainstream schools. She was forced to drop out of AAU in 2013 academic year while she

was 2nd year Sociology student. Right after she terminated in AAU, she immediately started to study Civics at first degree level in the extension program at KMU. She is now a 4th year graduating student and seems so confident that her future life will be full of success.

4.2 Description of participants' response

Interview was conducted with seven study participants as per the provided interview guide (Annex - 2) about their lived experience in relation to academic and social challenges they faced while pursuing their education at AAU. As stated earlier in this paper, the main objective of the study is to describe the challenge-related lived experience of female students with visual impairment who failed to overcome the challenges and consequently dropped out of AAU. Here are the key findings obtained from the participants of the study which is grouped under four main themes.

4.2.1. The risk factors of academic and social challenges

While studying at AAU, participants had number of possible risk factors for their education. Factors such as limited social interactions, gender and impairment, poor academic skills, low school attendance, poor social problem-solving skills, emotional problems, low socio-economic status; few opportunities for involvement in school activities, low levels of bonding to the university, and dependency on others were reported by the participants. Among these factors, however, four of them were found to be repeatedly expressed and considered as common experiences among the research participants. According to the response obtained from the study participants the first four risk factors are gender and impairment; poor socio-economic status; dependency on others and limited social interactions.

4.2.1.1. Gender and impairment

Being female coupled with visual impairment is mentioned by all participants as one of the main risk factors that lead to sexual abuse and harassment. Some of the research participants witnessed that they experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse in and out of the campus. They reported in the interview that they were afraid of being insulted or harassed by sighted peers (students) or other individuals outside the university compound. The study finding showed students who read or examine visually impaired female students sometimes abused their position and oblige students under this study especially those with low economic status to opt between two difficult options for the service they provided. The options were either to pay them high amount of service charge or to have sexual relationships with them. The sad story and experiences of the study participants who were victim of sexual abuse could be witness to show this phenomena and how female students with visual impairment were vulnerable to gender-impairment related risks. Participant four explained her experience as follows.

.... I was forced to stop my education because of unplanned pregnancy resulted from my relationship with my reader. Indeed, I had started this relationship without my willingness... Unfortunately I became pregnant and five months later I stopped my education and left the campus...

Participant seven, who was a student of second year Sociology department when she dropped of AAU, said there were challenges related to being female and visually impaired that prevented them from accessing, participating and being successful in higher education. She argued that the structure and functioning of AAU are in favor of males and discriminated those female students with visual impairment. She underlined that being female and visually

impaired is a double fold risk factor especially in poor country like Ethiopia. She explained her gender related experiences and shared it as follows

... Being female by itself is not a problem, but when we came to the gender issue it is another story.... I mean a lot of challenges will come out of it. When impairment is a plus on it, the situation would be even worsen.... Sometimes, I feel tired and hopeless when I think of my gender and impairment. No one can understand my pain unless and other wise standing on my shoes...

Regarding the issue of ‘impairment’ as a risk factor, the challenges started to confront the students with impairment from the beginning of their life at the university. According to the study participants, in AAU students with disabilities couldn’t select certain academic programs to study because they were believed to be incapable of meeting course requirements since they’re visually impaired. For example, besides all natural science courses, some field of studies such as journalism, psychology, statistics, archeology, and anthropology are not allowed to be studied by students with visual impairment. For example, “Law” was not the first choice of participant four. Her first choice was to study “Psychology” but she was told by the university staffs that Psychology was not allowed to be studied by students with visual impairment. She explained the situation as follows.

Before I joined AAU, I was dreaming to study psychology and be good counselor. Since I was visually impaired I can feel the pain of persons with visual impairment and I wanted to help them. Most women and girls with visual impairment have low esteem and self-confidence because of their impairment. And this limitation but not actually the impairment obstructed them from their dream. So I always wanted to study psychology and grasp the necessary knowledge and practice of the field so as to help them myself and my friends with visual impairment. However, this was not possible in the case of AAU and I was obliged to study “Law” without my interest just because I am visually impaired.

Participant four was not the only one to be refused studying what she desired to study but also participant six was experienced the same situation.

I was studying Political Science and International Relations at AAU which was absolutely not my choice. I even did not know the field of study before I came to AAU. I heard about the field for the first time in the registration period. My preference was to study Journalism but at the end of the day I found my name under the list of students of Political Science and International Relations field of study for the reason I didn't know on that moment. I tried to change it but no one could be willing to facilitate my case and I remained there. I didn't even know why they gave this field of study till second semester of my first year. When I knew my impairment was the main reason for not getting the field of study that I wanted most, I just felt bad.

Placement of field of study that don't match the interest of female students with visual impairment as stated above could be reason for poor academic performance. Consequently, the poor performance would lead them to the termination of their education.

4.2.1.2. Poor economic status

Poor economic status was one of the factors which were presented by the study participants. Participant six said the following while describing how her poor economic status contributed to affect her education,

I came from a very poor family, no doubt. I was helping myself from the beginning of my elementary school. I have been struggling financially in my secondary and tertiary education too. Of course when I was in AAU, I got some financial support from humanitarian organization but it still was not enough to cover my educational expense. I had a lot of educational expenses such as reader cost, examiner cost, frequent dry cell (battery) purchasing cost, digital tape recorder, braille paper, and so on. These expenses were purely educational and don't include other womanly expenses. Therefore, I had to think much about my expenses than my education and it was a challenge for me.

Since all the study participants came from families of poor socio-economic status they hardly gain economic support from their biological families. Most of them were extremely economic dependent on humanitarian organizations for their educational expenses. The study participants could not afford to cover the costs of converting their learning materials in

accessible formats and costs other educational expenses. As participant six explained, because of poor economic status it was very difficult to buy digital recorder or to cover the expense of converting (transcribing) the ink-written handout into Braille format.

4.2.1.3. Dependency on others

The third risk factor which was reported by the study participants were being dependent on others. The experience of participant five and six are presented below. According to participant five;

I was full of disappointment and felt bad whenever I was preparing for exam. I just can't read this whole amount of reading material by myself. I could have read the materials whenever I wanted if it was in a Braille form without being dependent on anyone. I could have just learned it without referring to other people's timing. Anyone who is studying for an exam needs motivation and needs to be focused. I cannot study when I am tired. So if the reader was available when I'm all exhausted with fatigue, she reads it for me but I just couldn't hear properly.

Participant six also shared her view as follows;

I cannot tell you how difficult to manage the exam process. The university used to inform us to bring examiners by ourselves. Finding competent examiner was the most difficult part for several reasons. First, the examiners themselves might have exams and they would be very busy. Secondly, there were few students in the department that can read properly so that I can understand the scenario. When I was in secondary school, the teachers himself/herself read my exams so I was comfortable to take exams as long as I am ready. Sometimes, I was forced to look for volunteer readers from my church union.

Due to high level of dependency on others in the inconvenient physical and academic settings, the study participants experienced challenges. For example, as participant five and six explained it was very hard to find examiners who can read well and also most of the readers or examiners were students themselves and had to prepare for their own exams.

Therefore the study participants had to wait till their readers get leisure time. And most of the time they were forced to re-schedule their program in accordance with the reader's timetable.

The study findings demonstrate that the study participants felt most dependent on others while they were students at AAU. Having incompetent and insensitive examiners was revealed as common experience for the study participants. Most of the readers and examiners were not that competent to be examiners and thus hardly accomplish their job properly. Particularly participant one and seven described the situation made them feel helpless and frustrated.

4.2.1.4. Limited social interaction

The limited social interaction is one of the risk factors reported by the study participants which might be related to the participant's high school history. Comparatively speaking, those study participants who spent their secondary education in boarding school (special school for blind students) tend to be shy and demonstrated that they had lesser social interaction in their university life. As Kef (2002) argues, students with visual impairment and passed through secondary special school listed fewer friends and significantly smaller social networks in their tertiary school life. All study participants were asked about their social interaction and revealed that they had no or very limited social interaction and spent most of their time alone. The experience of participant one and two that illustrate the above observation are presented below. Participant one said:

I wish I could have sighted friends to talk about personal issues, to discuss about the world, to go to some places together and refresh my mind. But I did not have any. And hence, besides my dorm the only place that I used to go freely was mobility [the compound of ENAB]. My social interaction

was so much limited and it surly had its own negative impact on my academic performance.

Likewise participant two stated

My social interaction was very limited and I had a very lonely life while I was a student of AAU. Most of the times I used to go to mobility [the compound of ENAB] to meet persons with visual impairment having the same gender, age, birthplace and life background so as to enjoy my time together with them. I was not sociable and there was no conducive environment to improve my social skills. I was not feeling comfortable in the class to ask for help or information about the course. I couldn't speak very well in front of students when I present my assignment and because of my inability to speak I just felt that everybody in the class including the teacher considered as I am stupid and don't deserve a place at AAU. Therefore, I used to prefer to be quiet and alone.

As the findings disclose, the study participants spent most of their time alone or with friends with visual impairment because of lack of social skill to socialize with sighted peers. Besides, they had a perception that their sighted class mates inclined to exclude them from their network even though they wanted to be part of their group. The study participants argued that apart from being supportive, friends with visual impairment could also be source of information and advice.

4.3 Types of challenges

This part of the paper presented the types of challenges in the learning process that the study participants had faced along the way. All study participants were asked about the types of challenges that hold them back from the successful completion of their education. The finding indicated that the challenges they experienced can broadly be categorized as academic and social challenges.

4.3.1. Academic challenges

One of the main challenges that were mentioned by all participants regarding academic challenges was the examination process. It seems examinations were the most significant meeting point of the students' impairment, abilities, needs and the environment of AAU. The finding revealed that the AAU staff, faculty and support services were not well aware of the way how to accommodate exams in a proper way to female students with visual impairment. Each participant had at least one sad experience in which something went wrong during the exam process. Inefficient exam administration was a very critical challenge that might be a cause for the academic dismissal of number of students with visual impairment. For example; participant one reported that she was told as her exam paper lost and she couldn't do anything to correct the problem which was not her fault.

Participant six also described the frustration that she experienced related to exam administration while she was a first year student. She tried to explain the situation as what worried her most was not the exam itself but the process she used to pass to take the exam. Participant four is one of the study participants that faced inefficient exam administration of AAU. As she said, after she completed every process to secure a reader for her exam, the reader didn't show up on exam time for the reason she didn't know. But the invigilator told her this was not his problem or fault. She said "He was not in a position to understand my situation and not willing to show any sympathetic feeling or trying to help me manage the problem"

Participant five explained what happened to her in related to academic challenges;

... I always frustrated when it was exam period because there was always hassle in the exam periods. No one was there to take a little care and attention for me. I had lost the examination room and I missed one final exam. I couldn't find it by myself; I was alone searching for the room. By the time I found the room, I had been told that I was too late. Then things started to go out of my control. That incidence was the turning point for my dismissal from AAU.....

The study participants underlined that female students with visual impairment needed reasonable accommodations at the time of assessments such as the provision of examiners, guide, and extra time for the completion of examinations. Participant one is one of the students who faced inefficient exam administration and she described that the main reason for her academic dismissal is the missing of her exam paper. She described what happened to her while she was a first year students of AAU as follows:

... I took the exam but no one registered my name on the exam attendance sheet. After I finished the exam I delivered it to the invigilator and went out of the exam room. That is all. After some days, I had been told to report to the department office because they [the exam administrators] claimed that I didn't take the exam. I was trying to explain that I took the exam even though I was shocked and felt helpless. It was so sad to know that my plan turn upside down with that silly administrative mistake and changed the direction of my life's journey. ...

Participant six also explained her experience in relation to the process of taking exams. She described the frustration that she experienced related to exam administration while she was a first year students as follows:

... First of all, it was very hard to get a sighted student within my department to read my exam. Secondly, my on time presence at the examination room by itself would not mean as the examination process carryout smoothly. The reader or examiner should have appeared on time too. Whenever it is exam time, I always suffered a lot with these situations. I was always worried about the exam process more than the exam itself. Then the reader's poor pronunciation and low attention and focus might be another problem...

On the other hand it is common to have readers and examiners who were not familiar with the terminology of the specific field of study and thus could not accomplish their job properly. Participant one discussed her experience about readers and examiner and stated as follows.

... In my field of study, law, there are so many terminologies that only a person in this profession can read or understand the words properly. In my first year I had an examiner which brought me to tears. The examiner had no clue how to read the texts. It's a law book and she didn't even know how to look at it. The exam time was approaching to end before I understand the exam's cases because of the reader's problem. I was stressed and stuck, such a feeling of helplessness. I cried when I went out of the exam room.

Participant three described her experience about insensitive and incompetent examiners as follows:

....Once, I had an examiner who was not even focused enough to remember that I am blind. He said to me "Hi, please sit there," well, where is "there"? I am blind. Later on I discovered that he is not familiar with the terminology of the specific field I was studying. He could not catch up with me. It was so frustrating, though I was trying all my best to cope this situation, it always happened and made me so tired of it....

Some of the participants in the study described as they experienced unbearable challenges regarding the accessibility of learning materials. Participant two reported the following story that happened to her.

When I was a first year student, I didn't know the culture and the way the university treats students with visual impairment and I asked the lecturer to provide the assignments for me in Braille format instead of ink format because I cannot see.... I mean I'm blind. I tried to explain myself to him, but he only said "I think there is nothing to be done for you... you should be able get along with it like everyone else!" That was the moment my hope started to erode and lose my confidence in my academic future.

Participant three also explained her experience;

... I attended my secondary education at Germen Church School (GCS) and the inaccessibility of learning materials for visually impaired students was insignificant. There were Braille books in the library, digital books and other references. That was my experience before joining AAU in terms of learning materials. I am limited and disabled because of the responses from the environment surrounding me. I was Braille user and Braille is one of internationally recognized instrument but I couldn't find learning materials in Braille while I was at AAU....

Though using adaptive technologies can minimize their dependence on others to read course handouts to some extent, it had its own limitations and was not an absolute solution for them as participant two explains:

... It was very difficult to depend fully on these technologies because of their limitations. For example JAWS don't read PDF documents if the document is scanned. Unfortunately, most of the articles in my field were found in scanned PDF format. So most of the time, I couldn't read using this software. For me, NVDA is better than JAWS that I can read such documents to some extent... I could read half of it by myself using NVDA and the rest half with the help of students to read for me. However, if I am asked my preference, I prefer to be supported by students and that was what I did in most cases...

Handling learning materials are a kind of tasks that includes but not limited to reading and summarizing course handouts which demands the skill to use adaptive technologies. All the study participants were capable of reading independently through screen reader software such as JAWS or NVDA and digital recorders. However, all of them preferred student readers since using these screen readers to its full extent was difficult because of its own limitations. All the study participants confronted this reality as an inconvenient situation of being dependent, but also were convinced that they had no other choices. Though using adaptive technologies can minimize their dependence on others to read course handouts to some extent, it had its own limitations and was not an absolute solution for them as participant two explains “JAWS don't read PDF documents if the document is scanned. Unfortunately, most of the articles in my field were found in scanned PDF format.”

Participant one explained how it was difficult for her to summarize learning materials as follows.

... When using Braille, the problem is that it is not possible to mark or highlight on very important points. I had to read the whole document so as to get a specific point or sub topic within the document. It was difficult to summarize the whole document in short or it might take a lot of time to do so. The same was true for listening to audio books or digitally recorded materials. While I used audio books I always face a problem to underline on important points because most of the time each track includes many chapters so you can't go back and forward. So whenever I wanted to find important information I asked my reader to scan the chapters for me in order to find something. Scanning the text, especially when it's long, is very hard and tiresome....

All the study participants can read and write Braille though the degree of their proficiency is varied. This would have helped them perform many tasks by themselves without the help of readers and could minimize the amount of time dedicated to reading as well as the student's dependence. However; unfortunately many of the learning materials in AAU were not accessible for Braille users, as participant six describes:

...If the learning materials were provided in Braille I would have been less dependent on the readers. If a sighted student needed handout of a course, he/she just went to one of photocopier centers found at the main gate of the campus and ordered a copy of the handout. That simple! Why on earth I couldn't have a copy of a course handout in Braille? Why not? If I needed to have the course handout, I had to go very long way... and of course if I am lucky. The AAU should have taken the responsibility of providing learning materials in accessible formats for students with disabilities in general...

The same explanations have been mentioned for having difficulties of handling learning materials. The study participant went to further steps to address this challenge; they tended to look for the summaries of course handouts prepared by sighted students to photo copy it.

And then they looked for someone to read the copied summaries and to be recorded. Since the study participants proficiency on Braille is differ their ability to write or take notes during class session was also different. Some of them used slate and stylus to write notes while some of them used tape recorders to record lessons. For students with low vision, the experience of sitting in class room and trying to see what is written on the board was really frustrating as participant two described below.

.... I am partial blind and my Braille skill is not advanced. If a lecturer did not allow me to record his lecture, I confused what to do. It was so frustrating that you know that other students do take notes quickly and you are doing nothing in the class. I sit in the class room, in the middle of the lecture I can hardly see what is written on the board, it's a weakness, a feeling that I have nothing to do with it, and the lecturer keeps on talking and you feel like you are hanging up in the air and it's so frustrating.....

On the other hand, there were course instructors who used projectors to support their lectures. Participant four described what she feels and experiences in attending a class lecture with projector as follows.

... Some of the lecturers used projectors in the class so as to cover more portions easily and in short period of time. But I don't think this was fair; I mean it didn't consider our need. It was often difficult, if not impossible, for me to follow presentations on transparencies displayed by lecturers. Not being able to follow in class and often had negative effect on adequate note-taking. I therefore preferred a variety of flexible teaching methods such as the provision of the soft copy of course handouts or to record lectures in the class. However most of the teachers were not willing and it frustrated me....

The other difficult task (other than reading) for the study participants was summarizing learning materials. Some of the study participants reported in the interview that they asked their lecturers to provide them the softcopy of their presentations. However, some of the lecturers refused to do it as participant three stated in her interview and presented below:

.... I felt the difference between courses in which I have the materials and presentations and those in which I don't have them. For example I have one course, the most terrible I ever had, the lecturer teaches all the lessons through power point and he didn't agree, under any circumstances, to provide the presentations to the students. I talked to him, presented myself and asked him to consider my impairment. He told me that I should read all the reference books listed on the course and then I would be ready for the exam. But since none of them were available in Braille I couldn't access it. I didn't even bother to come to this class anymore. I failed the course and I knew it that would happen before I took the exam....

Summarizing learning material was difficult mostly because the activity is based on visual functioning like scanning the text, highlighting important sentences and gathering key notes which is presented in different places in the material. Though the study participants utilized digital recorders and audio books, they regularly used of Braille to write and read texts which allows them reading by touching each line of dots as participant one explained it.

4.3.2. Social challenges

The second major theme identified as a challenge was social related problems. The analysis helped to identify two main phenomenal concerns associated with social challenges. These are their relationship with students who read texts or exams (examiners/readers) and their transition period.

All of the study participants indicated their relationship with students who read texts or exams (examiners/readers) were very challenging. The study participants emphasized as they were careful to separate the roles of male sighted friends and readers. According to the study participants, this is because most of the readers tend to change their friendship into sexual

relationship even though female students with visual impairment were not interested and ready to get involved.

The study participants reported that it was their responsibility to select their readers (examiners) and appear with them in the exam session. However, the readers must be students of AAU and senior students of the same department. The study participants reported that very few female students with visual impairment and many male students with visual impairment who had good social interaction in the campus would get free reading service from their sighted friends. However, none of the study participants had sighted friends (who provided them free reading support) while they were students of AAU and they all believed that this fact had negative impact on their academic performance at AAU. Besides, all participants stressed that they did not want to be dependent on their sighted class mates though they needed their support. Participant seven said:

... My sighted class mates, whether they are male or female, sometimes they helped me read very few stuff as a good person, not necessarily as a friend. But I don't want to be a burden for them and anyone else. After all they were also students and they needed to study and use their time properly. I have the cane, and I can walk by myself - I want people to be my friends, not my caregivers...

Participant six discussed in the interview about her relationships with sighted and visually impaired peers. She confessed with a reason that she preferred to have sighted friends as follows:

When I am with visually impaired students I feel like I am in a constant competition. However, with sighted people I do not feel this. The sighted students do not judge me for what I know or don't know. In the contrary they are very near to appreciate my accomplishment. I do what I can; they treated me as I am.

Contrary to the attitude of participant six, the attitude of participant two towards the preferences of the relationship of friends is in-group. Participant two said “Whenever I met sighted students, I felt so discomfort that their whole attention is on me and my activities. And when I did something that might be considered as “wrong” in their perspective, I felt shame and embarrassment.”

The preference of participant one and two regarding the type of friends they need to have was opposite to the preference of the other study participates. Both of them argued that apart from being supportive, friends with visual impairment could also be source of information and advice. Participant two said “Sometimes you just want to talk to someone who shares your problems and who could give advice and share experiences. And maybe you could learn something from it”. Participant one also said the following.

While I was a student at AAU, I just wanted to go and spend time with students like me... I mean with female students with visual impairment. It was not that I was trying to avoid the sighted female students, but it was because I felt normal when I was with my friends with visual impairment. I felt like the people who were with me were dealing with similar situations. They wouldn't judge me. Yah, I felt so encouraged. Being with them was like knowing that I have a place; I have people who care.

Discussion was also made about another type of social challenges which was their transition period as mentioned by the study participants. I asked them to give me a full description about their first year studies in the university. The study participants mentioned their feelings of loneliness, depression and hopelessness in their first year when facing a big and very complex institutional system of AAU. The responses to this question were almost the same for all research participants. Participant two articulated her thought as follows.

There were lots of adjustments, confusions and shocks. I was busy with adjusting and understanding what was happening around me. I never understood how the university is functioning for a longer period of time. I didn't understand anything about the number of departments, offices, registration process and so on. It was complicated. I felt like I was in the middle of nowhere. No one helped me or told me what I should do and how I could learn how to do it. It was really hard and threatening.

Participant four described her experience as follows.

My first year was a total panic, the most difficult year. I cried so much as I felt I was totally lost. It was a nightmare. I never forget that I even fell down on the stairs. I walked through places I didn't know before without anyone's accompany. I made it on my own. This was the most difficult situations for any female student with visual impairment.

Participant five said “My transition period was the hardest time during my first year. I felt so lonely since no one really pays me any personal attention. AAU’s staffs expected me to understand everything in the institution without telling me anything”.

Participant six suffered a lot in her transition period. Because of the challenges she faced in the beginning of her first year she was forced to decide to withdraw from the study for a year and readmitted at the end of 2015. However, she still couldn't manage the challenges she faced in AAU and at last she was dismissed. She explained her lived experience of the transition period of her first year as follows;

... It [the transition period] was the most difficult for me not only academically but the issue of adjusting myself to the university environment. The weather was chilly and the university compound and dormitories were cold. I didn't know whom to talk to about it..., who is doing what? And no one came towards me. In the middle of my first year I decided to quit and took a year off. In the next year, I tried to register again and it was really traumatic for me. All was the same, everything was as it is. So when I registered for the second time, I was really afraid that my future is dark. I was really afraid and predicted that sooner or later I would be dismissed. ... At last, what had been happening on me was exactly what I was thinking and expecting – I was dismissed.

As it has been discussed by the study participants, their experience of the transition period was full of challenges and most of them could not resist and unable to adjust themselves with the new environment. It seems that fresh students with visual impairment require a lot of accompaniment and guidance during their transition period in the university.

4.4 Accountability

Accountability issue was also discussed with the study participants to understand their perception of who they think should take the blame to the dropout of female students with visual impairment like them. Based on their comments, various stakeholders like the government, AAU, NGOs and the students themselves would share the responsibility.

Participant six argued her thoughts as following,

I think it is the government that should take the accountability. It should have taken the necessary monitoring and valuation or assessment of the policy implementation. Laws and policies are good but not good enough by itself to bring positive change. We don't have policy and law problem but we have implementation problem, there are number of policies and laws regarding the full participation of persons with disabilities. However, no one is worried about it and it only exists in the paper. After all, it is the duties and responsibilities of the government to control the appropriate implementation of its law and policies.

Participant seven has extended the blame to AAU as follows:

In my opinion, the laws, legislations, and policies of the country regarding the issue of persons with disabilities have no or insignificant (if any) limitations. But AAU, as a senior educational institution in the country, should have taken the initiation to be a place where the rights and full participation of students with disabilities is ensured. ... AAU, as being the oldest and senior educational institution, it should have been found in the first place in addressing our challenges.

The findings disclosed that five of the research participants pointed out their finger towards the government for their failures and for the existence of challenges that female students with visual impairment faced in AAU. As per to them, the government should take the blame for the higher dropout rate reveled on female students with visual impairment. The research participants believe that the government could have taken the necessary action to address the challenges of female students with visual impairment so that the dropout rate could be reduced.

4.5 Available resources, support systems, and services

The last discussion point was identifying possible resources, support systems, and services that were available for AAU female students with visual impairment. The aim of this discussion was not only to identify the available resources but also to understand the extent to which the study participants utilized it. In the midst of number of challenges, there are also some enabling factors that assisted female students with visual impairment. The finding showed the study participants identified five main resources, support systems, and services even though they didn't utilize the services provided by them as effectively as expected. Among the available resources, support systems, and services mentioned by the study participants AAU's gender office, AAU's special needs support office, AAU's library, and humanitarian organizations working on/for persons with disabilities and adaptive technologies were the main ones.

4.5.1. The special needs support office (SNSO)

The finding showed that among the seven study participants only one participant could utilize the service provided by the office. Yet, she underlined that the office needs to improve its service in the future in order to meet the expectation and needs of female students with visual impairment. She articulated her opinion about the office as follows;

... Every student with disabilities expect too much from this office. I think the capacity of the office and the expectations from the students were not well-matched. Though the office achievement and the students demand were not comparable, it is not fair to deny what this office did so far. But I believe that the office has to work so much in the future in order to meet its objective as well as the expectation of female students with visual impairment and fulfill their needs.....

The other six study participants described as they were not satisfied with the performance of the office in delivering the services to its target groups. Though the expert working in the office reported as the office has been working to support students with disabilities by providing accessible learning materials, adaptive technologies such as digital tape recorders, the study participants questioned the efficiency of the office. The study participants reported that the Braille paper which was provided by the office annually was not even sufficient to cover their quarterly consumption let alone the annual one. They suggested the office needs to act exhaustively to support students with disabilities who are struggling to overcome the multifaceted challenges.

4.5.2. Gender office of AAU

According to the study finding, none of the research participants were satisfied with the service offered by the office. The study participants reported as they had never been approached by the office to assess their status or they didn't show up in the office since they

didn't believe their challenges could be address by the office though the office is one of the possible resource centers. Participant six explained her experience related to the gender office s follows;

... While I was first year student, I was informed that the gender office was about to provide training for female students with disabilities. The trainings were about IGA [income generating activities].I was so happy to learn this situation for two reasons and went to the office to apply for the training. I had been in a lottery selling business since I was 14 or 15 and needed to get some skill to enhance my business proficiency. However, right after I got into the office, my happiness was replaced by deep sorrow. The officers didn't take any time to tell me that the training was not designed for students with visually impairment and could not accommodate me. It was so simple for them to tell me the news. But for me, the news was the hard to accept easily.

4.5.3. The library of AAU

The library of AAU is the other potential resource center for students with visual impairment though it served them in very limited capacity. The study participants explained that though AAU's library surrounded by lots of books, articles and researches that might be useful for them; they could not access all. They visited the library mostly for using the tape player to listen what they recorded in the class room and learning materials. Because of the very few tape players in the library they had to wait so long to use those tapes. It is no surprise that going to the library could be stressful for these students. The study participants emphasized that there was unequal privileged utilizing the library compared to their sighted counterparts. Participant six presented her view as follows regarding the library of AAU;

To tell the truth, I didn't often visit the library since it strived to serve mainly sighted students. Indeed the university did some modification to set up a corner to students with visual impairment so as to make the library accommodates all types of students including us. And there were only few books in Braille but they were out of dates to refer about the contemporary knowledge and understanding.

4.5.4. Humanitarian organizations

The humanitarian organizations for people with disabilities (HOPDs) were also considered as potential resources for persons with disabilities in general and female students with visual impairment in particular. In this regard, all the study participants mentioned their satisfaction with the work accomplished by humanitarian organizations such as “Together” and Ethiopian National Association of the Blind (ENAB). ENAB had been delivering a holistic intervention project for the last two years aimed at reducing the dropout rate of AAU female students with visual impairment. Participant one and seven who were the beneficiaries of this specific project explained the significance of the support as follows.

Participant one said:

... Of course, I agree with the idea that some kind of support like the financial one obtained from humanitarian organization might create dependency and develop weak personality on the recipients. But in a situation where life is full of various challenges like in our case, this holistic support obtained from our association [ENAB] could be considered as a life savior. It could help us prolong our stay at AAU to some level....

Participant seven also said:

... The project implemented by ENAB to empower female students with visual impairment was consisted number of interventions such as life skill training, computer training, monthly financial support and the likes. Although the monthly financial support I got from the project could hardly cover all my educational expenses, it significantly helped me. As anyone can guess, there are a lot of additional personal expenses for female students for the reason which might not be necessary to announce here [publicly]. I am female and at the same time visually impaired student You know what I mean? ... I mean ... I have very special needs as a female and also as a student with visual impairment....

Participant three and five have benefited from the support from “Together” during they were students of AAU and after they dropout from the institution. Participant five described what she got from this humanitarian organization as follows;

I was one of the students who were supported by “Together” when I was a student at AAU. They helped me a lot to cope with my challenges though I couldn’t overcome it. I think my challenges might be stronger than the support I got from them. However, after I was dismissed from AAU, I have never forgotten what Together did for me. They never let me down in my bad times. Instead... they lend me their hand. They offered me training of trainers (ToT) on basic computer application for persons with visual impairment and now I became a trainer in “Entoto Amba” secondary school.

4.5.5. Adaptive technologies

Assistive technologies were also considered as one of the supportive systems. Assistive technologies includes but not limited to computers with screen reader software, digital tape recorders and players, digital canes, touching watches, and the likes that can maximize the engagement and interaction of persons with disabilities to his/her environment. Participant six described her thoughts and experience about adaptive technologies as follows;

Yes, I benefited from using one of the products of adaptive technologies which is called the screen reader a lot. But I had two limitations to use it in full capacity. First, I needed a personal computer to upload the application and use freely whenever and wherever I wanted to use it. I only use the libraries computers for limited service time because of number of students waiting to use the same computer turn by turn. I was a student of AAU for almost two years and because of the nature of my field of study, I was expected to explore and read so many international political issues and documents. But I never had access to computers freely let alone having my own computer. If I had had the chance to work with my own computer, write assignment or use the internet in the library by myself in the university, I am sure I would have completed my education by now successfully. Second, the screen reader technology has its own limitation that prevents us from reading all types of document formats.

According to the finding, among the main resources and support systems identified by the study participants, the holistic support from humanitarian organizations and the technical assistance gained from adaptive technologies were significantly crucial. However, this doesn't mean that these resources were absolutely perfect; rather they both had their own limitations. Regarding the support from the humanitarian organizations, there was tendency to creating dependency syndrome to some extent. On the other hand the adaptive technologies were not fully accessible and had some constraints.

To sum up, this chapter highlights the major descriptions of the challenge related lived experiences of the seven study participants collected from the in-depth interviews. The next chapter will discuss on these major findings in relation to the relevant studies presented in the literature review part of this study.

Chapter Five

5 Discussion

This descriptive phenomenological study was conducted to describe the lived experiences of those female students with visual impairment who dropped out of AAU because of various challenges. Basically, the literature review and the finding were organized around the central research question posed and the specific objectives that this study sought to address. The main topics that were addressed by this study were the risk factors in relation to the ineffectiveness of female students with visual impairment in higher education, the magnitude and types of academic and social challenges experienced by female students with visual impairment, the participants' perception as to whom should be accountable for the occurrence of those challenges and finally the resources, support systems, and services that are available in AAU specifically designed for female students with visual impairment so as to meet their special needs were the major issues this study dealt with. Therefore, this chapter discussed on the major findings in relation to the relevant studies presented in the literature review part of this study.

4.6 About the risk factors

What triggered me to conduct this study was my firm assumption as being female coupled with visual impairment was the prime risk factor for the dropout of female students with visual impairment in AAU. Most of the study participants have also demonstrated my assumption as gender and impairment were the major risk factors of the group under this study. I wondered what it means to be female and visually impaired at a time while attending higher education. I wondered what feeling did the study participants experience

while experiencing academic and social challenges just because of their gender and impairment. The study participants shared me their experience that they were obliged to remain in their dormitory dreading the unfriendly and discouraging inside and outside campus environment just because of their gender status and impairment.

The study finding reveled as poor economic status as the one the risk factors for the female students with visual impairment. And this finding is in line with the point mentioned in the literature as Vancil (1997) identified low socioeconomic status is one of the risks occurs when an individual experiences a threat to satisfying basic human needs such as physical safety, sense of self-worth, efficacy, and belonging to a positive social network (Vancil, 1997).

4.7 Types of challenges

In chapter four, study participants described their challenge related experiences as of being female student with visual impairment. Based on the finding, I observed completing their university education successfully was their plan to integrate themselves into the mainstream society. However, while attending their education at AAU each study participant went through different sort of challenges which were strong enough to end their academic journey. The findings were presented in chapter four dividing the challenges it into two main parts, academic and social challenges.

The finding reveled that inefficient exam administration was a major challenge. It is reported that some of the course instructors refused to accept the capability of the study participants because of their impairment. Studies showed that the attitudes towards students with visual impairment primarily centered on perceptions of incapability (McBroom 1997).

In particular, they experienced that others, peers and lecturers, sometimes thought that they were incapable of pursuing a tertiary qualification.

The lived experiences of the study participants showed how female students with visual impairment had been struggling to fit themselves in the larger societal context in general and in educational contexts in particular. The finding has shown that in the transition period into higher education, considerable responsibility rested on female students with visual impairment themselves to claim independence. On the other side, a study by Berman and Naon (2004), argued that due to cultural influence, most of the time female students do not exhibit strong personalities so as to dominate their environments. Especially during their first year, students might not know how to get much needed support or whether they are illegible for accommodations (Berman and Naon, 2004). Female students with visual impairment need to prepare themselves in advance, they had to make an informed decision regarding the university they wanted to attend. Yet they were so disadvantageous by previous educational segregation. And as we can see from the finding of this study, female students with visual impairment were not included as fully as expected to be into the higher education system. This finding supports the argument of George and Duquette (2006) that while an inclusive commitment is evident through policy developments, the lived experiences of disabled students sometimes told a different story (George & Duquette, 2006).

The other findings were that all of the study participants who had a transition from special school had a limited social interaction in their university life and this situation maximizes the possibility to be exposed to stress. The transition to higher education is a major life change for every student which entails difficulties handling stressors which are

associated with this transition (Fairweather and Shaver, 1990). Most of the study participants reported that there were number of situations they faced such as depression and feelings of hopelessness while they were students of AAU. As McBroom (1991) argues students with disabilities may also experience depression and anxiety at higher rates than their non-disabled peers. University is not just a place for study but it is also campus life, leaving the parents' home for the first time, dorms, and social activities and making new friends. Research studies claimed that students with visual impairment have difficulties in social functioning, lack of social skills and small social networks (McBroom, 1991).

In addition to the hard work involved in the move to a tertiary institution, how smooth this transition went was often influenced by other factors. These included previous education, type of impairment and the personality traits of disabled students. In some cases, where disabled students had attended a segregated “special school”, such as a school for the blind, the transition was often more complicated than for those who transitioned from a regular school (Berman & Naon, 2004). This seemed to be closely tied to the level of support that was available to students during their school-going years. Since students received extensive support in segregated schools, they were often ill-prepared for the leap to the mainstream “self-catering” setting of a university (Berman & Naon, 2004)

Social skills would play significant role to resist the hardship of the transition period. The study finding demonstrated that none of the study participants could be able to pass second year and most of them are dropped of AAU at the end of their first year. They described the first year as a year that was the most difficult mostly due to the new environment and difficulty to adjust with the new environment. As they described the situation, research participants dedicated a lot of time to adjust themselves with the

academic demands, learning the rules and norms of the university, and their new status as independent grownups.

However, some students with disabilities feared being frank to others about their disability would lead to social barriers and exclusion, rather than a sense of belonging and togetherness. Of course, we may ask ourselves whether this concern had any grounds or it was somewhat irrational concern. There exists no answer to this question, as the experience of friendship, social encounters and level of acceptance were dependent on many factors and sometimes differed from student to student and from one relationship to the next. In some instances, disabled students have experienced stereotyping, labelling and pity from their nondisabled counterparts (Hodges & Keller, 1997). Hence, from the above discussion we can say that the challenges of the female students with visual impairment were found to be various in types. Keeping these challenges in mind, visually impaired students often did not feel included in the social aspects of tertiary life. Moreover, once again a lot of the responsibility rested on them to “smooth out” social interactions.

Last but not least, the role and importance of adaptive technologies could be considered as one of the support systems for students with visual impairment. Though adaptive technologies are necessary for students with disabilities (actually not only with visual impairment) most of the study participants could not afford to have them. Unfortunately, their poor economic status influenced their ability to buy adaptive technologies by themselves and hence it clearly affected their academic functioning and level of dependence. Unluckily, technological advances sometimes made it more difficult for visually impaired students to read electronic texts. For example, some websites and text formats like PowerPoint might be difficult, if not impossible, to read with the aid of a

screen-reader (French 1999). So, it has to be underlined that assistive technology did not solve the problem of inaccessible materials completely as it is described in the study finding. Additionally, the conversion of printed materials into an accessible format often took some time since publishing houses were sometimes unwilling to provide students with the electronic format of books. And so, numerous studies revealed that the learning of some disabled students, including those with a visual impairment, were still stifled by limited and delayed access to course material (Beaty, 1994)

Chapter Six

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

It is evident that the difficulties in providing adequate support services for students with disabilities reflect some significant gaps between policy and practice. From the stories of the study participants, it is simple to understand the reality that accessing higher education does not ultimately result in inclusion and full participation for female students with visual impairment. Indeed, improving the success rate of female students with visual impairment should not be left to some departments or offices within the higher education but it requires institutional effort, both wide in scope and systemic in nature.

The lived experiences of the study participants' revealed that their higher education pursuit was challenged by number of factors including but not limited to academic and social problems. In an environment where the academic and social challenges were addressed, female students with visual impairments could be more successful in their education. Creating a disability friendly environment for students with disabilities is very essential in order to ensure the full participation and fruitfulness of students with disabilities in higher education.

The main risk factors for the challenges of the study participants includes gender and impairment, poor socio-economic status, dependency on others and limited social interactions. Considering the various risk factors and its intense magnitude and negative consequences, it is essential to deal with the risk factors so as to prevent or reduce the magnitude and types of challenges upon female students with visual impairment.

This study attempted to see the participants' challenges by dividing into two main aspects; academic and social. Among those academic challenges experienced by the study participants, inefficient exam administration was a critical challenge that might be a cause for the academic dismissal of number of students with visual impairment. Therefore, intervention programs should focus to enhance the inefficient exam administration capacity so as to tackle the dropout rate of female students with visual impairments.

On the other hand, the student-reader interaction and the hardship of transition period (freshman) were the main challenges under social aspect of the study participants. Since they were responsible to provide their examiners by themselves, they faced numerous problems like being unable to take exams on time and negotiate with the examiners. Though the study participants pointed out their finger mainly towards the government for their failures, I felt the issue of FSwVI is deeply rooted within their biological, psychological, socio-economic status and educational systems of the country. Therefore, no single party can be responsible for their failure and hence a holistic intervention program should be adopted considering their special needs.

5.2 Implications

Even though the lived experience of each participant was unique to some extent, I can say a significant amount of common phenomenon was shared by all of them as a group. All of them had experienced academic and social challenges that pushed them away from the successful completion of their higher education. I believe this study will have helpful implication in the development of educational policies, social work practices, and for further

similar studies. The study will also have an implication for concerned stakeholders who work to improve and ensure the full participation of FSwVI in higher education.

This study could be served as an initial review for educational policy makers and advocates who are interested in promoting for or developing a separate alternative policy regarding the issue of FSwVI in particular and all students with disabilities in general. Since the study described how FSwVI experienced the academic and social challenges, it will inform policy makers how the phenomena was perceived by the FSwVI, this in turn would lead policy makers to designing a policy that is tailored as per the interests of the group under the study. Social workers can be engaged in identifying, assessing, planning, intervention, and evaluation of the services provided for FSwVI regarding their full participation in higher education. Since the findings of this study has revealed both the unique & common experiences of the FSwVI, social workers can apply them to deal with similar challenges and it can be of great value for a successful social work practice.

The study has been intended to assess the challenge related lived experience of the FSwVI who dropped out from AAU. It has tried to fill the gap in knowledge regarding the experiences of the FSwVI by applying a phenomenological research. Although this study has explored the challenges of FSwVI by focusing on academic and social aspects, it might be crucial to investigate other aspects of the challenges of FSwVI. In this regard, this study might initiate future research considering all types of challenges in a more detailed way. This is a qualitative phenomenological study which does not give a quantitative insight on the case, rate, prevalence and incidence of challenges. In the future, researches might be triggered to conduct researches around the issue by following various research designs other than qualitative & phenomenological designs.

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Annex – 1

Participant Consent Form

My name is Tilahun Kifle. I am a post graduate student of School of Social Work in Addis Ababa University. Currently, I am assessing the Challenges of Visually Impaired Female Students in Higher Education for the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Social Work. For this purpose, I need to gather information from Visually Impaired Female Students who had dropped out of school. I therefore, kindly request your willingness to respond some questions. The participation with this research is purely voluntary and you might not have any immediate benefit. However your response to each question is very essential for the study purpose. If you are willing, I will contact you at a convenient place and conduct the interview. The session of the interview will take a maximum of two hours. If it is appropriate, I will use the tape to record the conversation and will be deleted up on the completion of the study. In doing so, any of your personal profile and name will not be indicated rather it will remain confidential.

I, _____, have read the information provided and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research project, realizing that I may withdraw at any time without reason and without prejudice. I understand that all identifiable information that I provide is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher in any form that may identify me unless I have consented to this. The only exception to this principle of confidentiality is if this information is required by law to be released. I agree to have my conversation recorded and also to be photographed and / or videotaped if necessary.

Participant signature

Date

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by Addis Ababa University, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researcher at any time. In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of the researcher may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research by contacting the Addis Ababa University, Graduate School of Social Work. All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project.

Annex – 2

Interview Guides

1. Demographical Questions

- 1.1. Age
- 1.2. Birth place
- 1.3. Field of study
- 1.4. Level of impairment
- 1.5. Causes of impairment
- 1.6. Impairment onset age

2. General Questions

2.1. Focus Area - High School

- 2.1.1. What kind of high school did you attend? Mainstream school or special school?
- 2.1.2. What accommodations did you receive while you were in high school?
- 2.1.3. Do you think your high school life affect your higher education? If so, how?
- 2.1.4. Did you have other occupations / hobbies after school hours while you were in high school?

2.2. Focus Area – University

- 2.2.1. What was your field of study at AAU?
- 2.2.2. How did you choose your field of study?
- 2.2.3. What sort of challenges did you encountered at AAU resulting from your visual impairment?
- 2.2.4. What sort of challenges you encountered at AAU resulting from being female and visually impaired?
- 2.2.5. Can you describe the magnitude and the type of these challenges?
- 2.2.6. Who do you think should take the blames for the existence of these challenges?
- 2.2.7. Can you please rank the following bodies as to where the challenges of female students with visual impairment possibly originated from based on your perception?

- I. The Government of Ethiopia
- II. Addis Ababa University
- III. Humanitarian Organizations
 - i. Community members and families of female students with visual impairment
 - ii. Female students with visual impairment

2.2.8. What were your coping mechanisms to manage these challenges?

- 2.2.8.1. Were there available resources and services provided by the university or any other concerned parties?
- 2.2.8.2. Did you utilize these resources? If so how well? If not, why?
- 2.2.8.3. What were the risk factors that might be a threat for your studies in AAU?
- 2.2.8.4. Did the thoughts you had before joining AAU match what you found out in practice?
- 2.2.8.5. Did you have any issues with university bureaucracy? If so, how were these issues resolved?

2.3. Focus Area - Orientation and Accommodations in higher education

- 2.3.1. Would you please tell me about your first year time at AAU?
- 2.3.2. Do you think your high school history affect your transition to higher education? If so, was it positively or negatively?
- 2.3.3. Is there anyone who welcomed you and gave you orientation on the campus physical setup?
- 2.3.4. How did you find the physical setting of the campus in relation to the needs of persons with visual impairment?
- 2.3.5. How did you read learning material?
- 2.3.6. Could you access learning materials easily? How did you search for learning material? How did you perform your assignments?
- 2.3.7. What type of technical aids or adaptive technologies devices did you use? For example, Braille machine, tape recorder, computer with Braille monitor, text to voice software....
- 2.3.8. Was your dormitory at AAU accessible for persons with visual impairment?
- 2.3.9. Was the library of AAU accessible for persons with visual impairment?

2.3.10. What facilities in the campus was inaccessible for persons with visual impairment?

2.4. Focus Area - Interactions with lecturers

- 2.4.1. Were the lecturers aware of the fact that you are visually impaired?
- 2.4.2. Did the lecturers offer some kind of assistance? If so what kind?
- 2.4.3. What kind of feelings did the lecturers have to you?
- 2.4.4. Was there a particular lecturer who refused to help you? What do you think the reason of his/her refusal?

2.5. Focus Area - Social interactions and friendship

- 2.5.1. How well was your sociability while you were a student of AAU? If it was good or not good, what do you think the reason for being good or not good?
- 2.5.2. Did you know any senior students in the university before you entered into the university? If so, did they help you adjust to the environment?
- 2.5.3. How often did you meet your friends?
- 2.5.4. Did you have good friendships bonding that helped you in university?
- 2.5.5. Were the feature of university friendships different from other friendships which you have had during your previous life? If yes - how?
- 2.5.6. Do you have a preference of having friends from in-group (visually impaired) or out-group (sighted)? If so, what is your justification?
- 2.5.7. Did you have friends who were visually impaired? How strong was your bonding?
- 2.5.8. Did you have friends who were sighted friends? How strong was your bonding?

2.6. Focus Area - Academic and Social Adjustment

- 2.6.1. Did you have leisure time activities (hobbies like sports or singing) after your learning hours?
- 2.6.2. How do you spend leisure time? With whom?
- 2.6.3. Did you learn anything about yourself as a person with visual impairment while you were attending your education at AAU?
- 2.6.4. What kind of assistance did you need most and you lacked it while you were attending your education at AAU?

- 2.6.5. What kind of assistance made you feel more comfortable or less difficult to ask for while you were attending your education at AAU?
- 2.6.6. Who were the people whose support was most significant for you? What kind of support was it?
- 2.6.7. In your opinion, what does it mean is a success in university for female students with visual impairment like you?
- 2.6.8. In your opinion, what does it mean is a failure in university for female students with visual impairment like you?
- 2.6.9. What did you feel when you think of yourself out of Addis Ababa University and could not complete your higher education?

2.7. Focus Area - Conclusion

- 2.7.1. Can you please tell me your experience, thoughts and feelings to be female and visually impaired person in Addis Ababa University?
- 2.7.2. Do you think there are any issues that I did not mention but you would like to talk about? If so please feel free to tell share me your thoughts.
- 2.7.3. What does it mean to be female and visually impairment at a time while attending higher education?
- 2.7.4. What feeling do the research participants experience while facing academic and social challenges just because of their gender and impairment?

Thank You!

