



# The Lived Experiences of Female Students with Blindness for Higher Education at Bahir Dar University

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of blind female students for higher education using a phenomenological understanding of disability. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight participants. I analysed interviews following principles of interpretative phenomenological approach. Four themes with sub-themes emerged: attitudes of the general environment, institutional environment (campus accessibility and disability support service), learning environment (accessing course materials, reading and assessment experiences), and social environment (interaction with sighted people and sense of accomplishment and pride). The experience of blind female students is primarily that they are treated as a female and blind person by the social environment. Stressing their competence for university studentship plays a major role in their lives, and a majority of people question their suitability for tertiary education. Few people provided support more than expected. From perspectives of the right to equitable services, these students need to be provided appropriate support services.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Being blind is seriously challenging for anyone (Genet, Kumar & Sulphery 2021; Zegeye 2020). This would be more so for blind female university students, as they are expected to handle the challenges of blindness, being female, and the demands of tertiary education in parallel. How do blind female students become successful in their education while they are in the university, especially in the context of Ethiopian universities, where there is a lack of positive attitudes and disability support service provisions? The answer to this question takes us to explore the lived experiences of blind female students attending their education in higher learning institutions.

Under national and international legal instruments, higher learning institutions are responsible for responding to the needs of students with disabilities (Lohrenscheit 2006). Disability is conceptualised as restrictions caused by institutions when they do not give equitable support as per the needs of disabled peoples (Oliver 2013). Hence, universities are required to remove systemic barriers, negative attitudes, and social exclusion, which make it difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to meet their learning needs. Higher education tailored in such a way can present several new possibilities and opportunities for students with disabilities. It may help them enhance their knowledge, make friends, and make important career decisions (Beauchamp-Pryor 2013).

In short, a university degree is often an entry to a better future for blind students (Holloway 2001). However, before they taste the pleasant outcomes of higher education, they have to overcome numerous challenges and barriers along the way (Goode 2007). These challenges include architectural barriers, negative attitudes, difficulty in accessing course materials, and inaccessible pedagogy, among others (Beauchamp-Pryor 2013; Holloway 2001). Hence, these students are at higher risk of leaving higher education prematurely compared to their non-disabled peers (Goode 2007).

The effects of blindness on individuals may vary depending on society's attitude towards disability and the socio-economic status of blind people (Zegeye 2020). In Ethiopia, there is gender bias and widespread stereotypical beliefs towards women and disability (Genet, Kumar & Sulphery 2021). Being female, blind, and a student in the Ethiopian context can leave these individuals in a different life experience that may need to be systematically explored and documented. Consequently, this study tried to explore lived experiences of blind female students in higher education. To do so, we should listen to them. They can speak straight from their own experiences, learning approaches, and reactions to people in their daily lives. This resonates closely with Kittay's concept of epistemic accountability, namely, 'to know the subject under study'. When we listen to these students, we will get to 'know' their challenges and difficulties (Goode 2007). We will hear their hardships, disappointments, frustrations, and sadness as we investigate deeper into their lived worlds. Also, we may start to discover possible areas that need to be changed. After all, Swartz and Watermeyer (2006) argue that change is only possible if opportunities and difficulties encountered by individuals are explored and documented. Hence, it is significant to know the lived experiences of blind female students and to utilise them productively in improving their experiences, which would ultimately make these students feel proud that they can also contribute to developing equitable access to education and services (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). Therefore, we have to listen to the successes and achievements of these students to know what and/or who assisted them in their journey to succeed in the university.

Yet, I believe that simply listening to stories of blind female students is not sufficient. Their stories of struggle and success should be documented so that their experiences can inform and guide the development of research, policy, and practice in higher education. As the Ethiopian government is attempting to meet the needs of students with disabilities, the finding of this research can contribute to the development of policy and practices.

### 1.1 RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The impetus for this study grew from my observations that blind female students on Bahir Dar University's main campus are struggling to win several challenges they encounter on various occasions. Though there is a growing body of literature on the lives of students with disabilities in general, studies on the voices of female university students with blindness in the Ethiopian

higher education context are almost non-existent. In instances where other studies have been conducted on the situation of students with disabilities in Ethiopia, they mainly included the voices of teachers, parents, and peers rather than the voices of these students (Tefera 1998).

Disability experiences may vary across different categories of disability in university settings, since the challenges and needs are different and even the experiences of students within one category of disability may be different (Alqaryouti 2010). Likewise, blindness may not be experienced similarly by women and men, as the views about blindness are formed and determined by the culture of a society where blind females are subject to double discrimination (Habib 1995; Zegeye 2020). In the present context of Ethiopia, there is limited understanding of the lived experiences of blind female students for higher education. It is, therefore, imperative to explore how blind female students experience student life and the learning environments at Bahir Dar University.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This study represents an exploration of lived experiences of blind female students. It then cascades within the category of qualitative research approaches, and several qualitative designs could have been considered to accomplish the objectives of this study. However, the qualitative method of interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed in this study because it is more helpful than other qualitative approaches, as it provides researchers the chance for detailed examination of personal lived experiences, the meaning of the experiences to participants, and how participants make sense of those experiences (Smith 2011). Hence, I preferred and applied IPA over other qualitative approaches to comprehend, reflect, and interpret the real essence of blind female students' lived experiences in the current context of Bahir Dar University.

### 2.2 POPULATION, SAMPLE, AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES

There was a population of 30 blind female students attending their education at Bahir Dar University in the 2020/21 academic year. Students who were expected to graduate in this academic year and who did not have any other major impairment/s other than blindness were invited to participate in this study. Accordingly, 8 of them were included using the purposive sampling method. The purposive sampling method was applied because it gives me the opportunity to recruit samples with a definite purpose in mind (Neuman & Rossman 2006). The sample size of 8 follows Polkinghorne's (1989) suggestion that interviewing 5 to 25 persons who have experienced the incident under study is enough. The sample students have been at the university campus for many years and are supposed to have a rich experience of this university campus. The samples demographic characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

NO.	PSEUDONYM	VISUAL IMPAIRMENT TYPE	ONSET OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT
1	Aster	Totally blind	Birth
2	Chaletu	Totally blind	Birth
3	Alemaz	Totally blind	7 years of age
4	Lemlem	Totally blind	8 years of age
5	Berhan	Totally blind	Birth
6	Alemnesh	Totally blind	12 years of age
7	Sisayenesh	Totally blind	5 years of age
8	Samrawit	Totally blind	10 years of age

**Table 1** Background information of participants.

### 2.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Semi-structured interview was used to gather data because interview, according to Neuman and Rossman (2006), is one of the most powerful ways used to understand others' interpretations of their experiences and gives participants the chance to think, speak, and be heard (Smith

2011) Additionally, using a semi-structured interview guide is meant to give a voice to the voiceless (Atkinson & Hutchinson 2013), as most studies conducted on the perspectives of blind people oftentimes overlook them in reflecting their views (Goode 2007). Based on the recommendations of Giorgi (2009), I developed a semi-structured interview guide that considers the design of the study, the research questions, and pertinent related literature in such a way to work well for IPA.

The first draft interview questions consisted of fifteen items. To ensure they addressed the intended meaning, I conducted discussions with five second-year blind female students. Three special needs educators also commented on the interview questions. Thus, based on comments given in the final semi-structured interview guide, 12 items were developed and used: for example, What is your experience as a student living with blindness on this university campus? How do people on the university campus view you as a female student with blindness? Describe to me your experiences concerning support services you experienced as a blind female student.

To maintain the credibility of the information provided by the participants, I tried to be non-reactive to the participants' responses, and I set aside my values, expectations, and personal feelings and experiences that might influence the conduct and conclusions of the study. To create the utmost understanding, the interview was carried out in Amharic (the national language of Ethiopia). Participants were permitted to tell the whole of their life experiences through the due emphasis given to issues directly connected to their university campus experiences, such as the nature of their visual disability, the teaching and learning environment, social attitudes, support service provisions, and perceptions of success and failure. The structure of the interview was flexible enough to let the participants recount their life stories in a way they liked to go through them. I also requested feedback from participants about the information they provided to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meanings of what they had said (Creswell & Poth 2016). Additionally, items in the interview guide were presented in such a way as to maintain a logical sequence and were in an easy format to facilitate information flow once the participant started to narrate her life experiences. During interviews, I asked questions and allowed participants to explore areas pertinent to their university campus experience.

## 2.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When conducting this study, I followed ethical guidelines suggested by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2002). The first activity that I did was to get the participants' consent. Once permission was obtained, I made participants feel safe and secure regarding the information they provided. To make participants feel more confident, each participant was pre-informed that her real name would not be used while reporting the results. Participants were also oriented to understand their rights to confidentiality and anonymity and their right to withdraw at any time, without having to give their reasons. Interviews were audio recorded after obtaining their permission.

## 2.5 ANALYSIS OF DATA

The IPA (Smith 2011) was used to analyse the interview data. Each interview was first transcribed verbatim, and I read and re-read it several times. Firstly, I analysed interviews independently and grouped them into general and detailed sections where I separately prepared notes and investigative remarks on important sections of the transcript for exploring how participants understood, communicated, and revealed their lived experiences. In this within-case analysis step, I remained close to the participant's unequivocal meaning. Then, I made separate representations on a contextual level by providing interpretation and concentrating on the participant's understanding. The within-case analysis primarily served as the foundation for the across-case analysis (Yin 2009). Accordingly, in across-case analysis, I concentrated on the interconnections, relationships, and patterns between and among all investigative notes. I conducted this to find emerging additional themes. I first sequentially organised the identified themes for every interview. I then outlined parts of each interview together with emerging themes in an independent table for every interview. Groups established on patterns with higher order broader themes were organised according to the guidelines described by Smith (2011). Lastly, the broader themes and sub-themes resulting from the analysis of all interviews were compared and revised to make them more general.

### 3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

While analysing the participants' lived experiences, four major themes and seven sub-themes emerged: the 'attitudes of the general environment' (A) major theme emerged as a unique theme which influenced all other themes. The sub-themes 'campus accessibility' (B1) and 'disability support service' (B2) were categorised within the major theme of 'institutional environment' (B). The sub-themes 'accessing the course material' (C1), 'reading experience' (C2), and 'assessment experiences' (C3) were categorised together in the major theme 'learning environment' (C), and the sub-themes 'interaction with the sighted people' (D1) and 'sense of accomplishment and pride' (D2) were categorised together within the major theme of 'social environment' (D) (Table 2).

MAJOR THEMES	SUB-THEMES
A. Attitudes of the general environment	
B. Institutional environment	B1. Campus accessibility
	B2. Disability support service
C. Learning environment	C1. Accessing the course material
	C2. Reading experience
	C3. Assessment experience
D. Social environment	D1. Interaction with the sighted people
	D2. Sense of accomplishment and pride

**Table 2** Major themes and sub-themes.

#### 3.1 THE ATTITUDE OF THE GENERAL ENVIRONMENT

Unfavourable attitude prevails, and the university community does not see blind female students as competent to carry out things like that of the sighted. Of course, all students with disabilities are victims of this kind of prejudice. Even the general society has also a lower expectation for sighted female students. [Berhan]

People in the university have a negative attitude toward blind female students and had lower expectations for them. Sighted people do not believe that these students can learn and graduate from a university like other students. The prejudices concerning blind persons are decisive, and participants shared their experiences with sighted people. They are not viewing them as individuals with potential, particularly when it comes to blind female students; people in the university emphasise their visual disability more than their capability.

Participants were asked about tasks related to their tertiary education. They reported that 'People in the university campus were challenged to imagine how we female blind students can carry out it' [Aster] and that they have a belief that blind girls lack a potential to realise as a university student: 'People could not even think that I, like other sighted students, can accomplish the tasks of higher education' [Alemaz]. People on the university campus used to ask them questions about their visual disability that they probably did not ask sighted students. Examples of such questions are 'How can you manage to move from place to place in this complex campus unless you have someone permanently guide you? Can you withstand the burdens of university education as you are female and blind? What will be your fate if you are dismissed from this university?' [Chaletu].

People who have never seen blind female students at a university were surprised and asked how they had managed to reach a university-level education. They never think a blind female can be a university student: 'Wow, you blind girl able to join the university! Is the result yours?' [Berhan]. They will not accept that 'I got the grades to enter the university and that I came to study at the university because of chance, not my own efforts' [Alemnesh], and they tell me that 'I have reached here by the miracle of the creator' [Aster]. Participants believe that the sighted people in the general university community asked these questions because the participants are female and blind. They took these questions as something that reveals the prevailing prejudiced attitudes of the general social environment.

It is not unusual for many people to appreciate blind female students as if they are unique persons, justifying that they are favoured by the Creator: 'Wow, you are lucky to join this university with the help of God' [Lemlem]. Lemlem views these praises as manifestations of their lower expectations for her. They were amazed that blind female students can learn in a university amidst the many challenging things on the university campus. The participants believe this was prejudice and the wrong conception of the majority in the university community.

### 3.2 THE INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Mention of the accessibility of and support provisions on the university campus, which was found uncomfortable and insufficient, was unavoidable when talking about the experiences of blind female students on this university campus. These students have bad experiences concerning the physical structure and support services, and they feel that the university did not consider meeting their special needs and that they were poorly supported.

#### 3.2.1 Campus accessibility

There are a lot of barriers in the area of my classrooms, dormitory, cafeteria, and library. The roads are full of obstacles; for instance cars are parked here and there. The roads are also overcrowded with people. [Alemnesh]

I couldn't say that I'm able to get around all important areas of the campus; it is difficult for me at least to get around confidently to my classrooms, café, and library where I need to go to as a student. To travel to different buildings, to different offices I can't do unless someone accompanies me. [Alemaz]

Participants described the physical structures of the university campus as being problematic and in some cases inaccessible for blind students. The participants ran into several hurdles to get into classrooms on several occasions. For instance, Alemaz was not able to avail herself of final examinations due to the inaccessible location of the building where the exam classrooms were positioned. Alemnesh also described that mobility around the main campus was not an easy business for the blind, though the topography of the campus is naturally plain, and man-made obstacles necessitated the use of assistants. They have also experienced the risk of falls: 'I remember once in the past I had fallen over in the classroom because of the presence of several obstacles such as chairs and tables scattered in the classroom and at times they are customised to sighted students' [Samrawit].

#### 3.2.2 Disability support services

No one oriented us on how we live on the university campus at all. I asked friends and people if there is a resource room with disability-specific equipment and materials. I could have received support and services from professionals too if a resource centre existed and has those professionals who can support me. [Chaletu]

Participants described the vast majority of university staff as being unaware of the special needs of blind students, and they made little effort to provide support services for them. They ran into a lack of positive treatment, support, and understanding from workers of different offices once they visited. The university has no resource rooms staffed with professionals that provide support services for students with disabilities. All of the participants were highly concerned regarding the availability of support provisions, as exemplified by Chaletu. The participants have repeatedly asked the university to provide appropriate support to blind students: 'Once me as a member asked the concerned body a question why the university at least provides support for blind female students who have been struggling to win the challenges imposed by blindness and being a female' [Alemnesh]. We should have been provided a better support, 'as females are victims of prejudice and stereotypical attitudes in addition to the impacts of blindness' [Lemlem].

### 3.3 THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Participants reported that it was not only the physical structure that was less accessible but also the teaching and learning enrolment. Though the majority of course instructors remain unaware of their role to provide the course material in accessible formats, few of them were



able to consider and try to make accessible course material for blind students. Unawareness about the special learning needs of these students on the part of instructors and sighted students made these students shoulder several roles and responsibilities.

### 3.3.1 Accessing course materials

When instructors are using projectors, I tried to listen and also record what he talks [about]. The problem is the instructor talks about some issues he displayed on the projector and also what he talks about is fragmented which is difficult to understand when I listen to the recorded one. This is true in most of the courses I learned. [Alemaz]

According to the participants, course instructors were unaware of the special needs of blind students and excluded these students in their lessons and teaching materials. Because of this, Alemaz did not receive learning materials in accessible formats. Participants said that instructors are expected to provide students with lecture notes in soft copies and provide the textbook and handouts for conversion into Braille, but 'only very few instructors who are well aware of my needs are doing it for me' [Berhan]. Berhan further commented that willing and committed instructors who provide proper support are a remarkable relief for blind students. 'Timely accessible course materials placed me on an equal footing with my sighted classmates and what they did just make[s] things easy for me to do well like other sighted students' [Aster].

From the accounts of these students, it was obvious that instructors differed in their willingness to make course materials available to them. Most instructors were not accommodating and were concerned to assist them. 'Many instructors did not give us the soft copy of the course materials. When asked instructors promised and usually said okay, I will do it, but practically they did not do as per their promise for reasons I did not know' [Chaletu]. Even instructors who seem willing to provide support for blind students simply forgot about their needs in classes. 'Like for example in the class, instructors do at times forget about me. They give out print materials and then I all the time have to tell them repeatedly. ... Instructors just say ... Oh, I forgot. And after that, they will say to me to come afterward' [Samrawit]. Hence, according to participants, it is apparent that instructors who are committed to providing support, such as making course materials available and accessible, are helpful in noteworthy ways. However, as noted above, the majority of the instructors did not provide support as it is expected from them.

Due to a lack of support from the instructors, it is evident that the students usually took much responsibility upon themselves in accessing different course materials. If they did not take this initiative, they would have faced the harsh implications of falling behind, asking for a withdrawal, not attending class, or even failing to score the minimum required grade. Regarding this issue, one participant said,

In the perfect world, you most likely could have discussed that it is not supposed to be your responsibility. It would be the responsibility of the instructors and the resource centre personnel. But the issue is [that] if you do not do it, you will struggle so much more... . A freshman blind student has so much more responsibilities than a freshman sighted student. I mean we constantly have to make certain that we have our course material ... in [an] appropriate format. [Alemaz]

Some tasks, like studying the course material, are the normal responsibility of blind students, like others. However, several responsibilities, such as reminding and communicating with the course instructors to give them lectures in soft copies and accessing course materials by getting recorded notes of sighted students, are additional tasks that rest on blind students. These additional tasks become tiring, as described by them, 'And then you will tell the course instructors that course materials are significant and that you want it before the exam time. You try to always remind them as most of them forget it' [Sisayenesh].

### 3.3.2 The experience of reading

I can tell you that we have to read the whole material that 50 or more pages for one course, whereas sighted students employ highlighters, they use rulers, they use

pens, pencils and they underline most central concepts... . And when they prepare for exams they can study highlighted work... . But we the blind cannot scan through our work; we have to read everything. [Sisayenesh]

Participants described that the task of reading was often challenging and tiresome. As noted by Sisayenesh, reading every detail using Braille is time-consuming and needs a lot of patience. Besides, some friends and classmates positively reacted and supported them when they were asked to read for blind students. Aster particularly appreciated and thanked her friends and classmates for their tremendous contributions in reading and recording course materials for her. Some friends 'helped in reading the course materials as well as examination questions' [Chaletu]. In some instances, these students faced challenges in that some friends got easily bored when 'I give them directions like read, stop, skip or wait as the need arises... . When I do this frequently they get bored and asked me to continue some other day and they leave' [Berhan].

### 3.3.3 Assessment experiences

All these obstacles such as from reading to accessing materials to taking exams you have to beat all of them. It is not only ... the instructors cannot change the print exam to Braille, simply they gave me the exam paper and it is up to me to find a person who reads the exam for me. They never give me some additional time compensating for time lost while the reader reads and then the time I took to listen and understand. You know the sighted students simply read and understand within a short time, but I cannot do this. [Aster]

Fear of failing or lower grade scoring was seen among the study participants, and in some participants, there were mixed feelings and reactions when they sat for tests and exams: 'When I sit for tests and exams I usually worried and feel frustrated... . Ummm ... I am not feeling comfortable with exam readers, and the sites we sit with our readers are in most case[s] outside the classroom, along corridors where the noise of [passersby] are common. This makes me worried and a source of the disturbance' [Brehan]. It is also well noted by participants that as they faced challenges concerning reading and access to course materials, they also complained about the way they are assessed, and they suggested special accommodations at the time of assessments. Firstly, in the ideal context, exam papers need to be converted into an accessible format, and extra time should be given. But in reality, according to participants, converting print tests and examinations to Braille or electronic format and the provision of extra time are absent in the context of this university.

## 3.4 THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Participants stated that the broader society and the university community are unaware and dubious that they can be socially active members of society. Prejudiced and negative social relationships appear to be the dominant social attitude on the university campus, and few students and staff have positive regard and interact with them.

### 3.4.1 Interaction with people

I can tell you that except [for a] few close ones, students and course instructors treat you differently if you have a disability. And yes, it is challenging socially, because people do not easily accept you... . They treat you in a different way. [Alemaz]

In addition, the admin staff members (proctors, janitors, and others in the office) do not have a welcoming relationship with the blind. Alemaz further stated,

For as long as I can remember, I have had no friendly type of social relations with the support staff in this university. When you happen to meet them outside their office somewhere on the university campus, they will greet you and they will not talk to you like they do with the sighted. I am sure they wouldn't be like this If I were sighted.

From the participants' descriptions, it was understood that negative perceptions of sighted people were manifested in several contexts. Some participants noticed that sighted people



often expected very little from them. They observed that sighted people often perceived them as helpless, incapable victims of circumstances who cannot control their physical and social environments. For instance, Samrawit reported, 'There are several occasions where people think that you could not walk fast or could talk slower or that you could not be able to play. They think that you are blind, so it is more like you have got to sit at home, wash and get food and everything.'

Possibly as a direct result of perceptions of helplessness, some female blind students observed that non-disabled people usually thought that they needed consistent care and assistance. Paradoxically, these perceptions and helping responses were considered very unhelpful for them. Participants commented that friendships with non-disabled people could be tilted because of these unreturned helping responses:

I have few friends on the campus, but one of my friends, in some situations I do not know whether I could call her a friend. She is of course very nice to me and we went for tea before, but it feels to me like she is approximately friends with me since she sought to take me under her wing. She does not care for me normally like she treats her other friends. [Aster]

According to the participants' report, it is obvious that blind female students observed the 'helping responses' of sighted individuals in different ways. For some, it implies the beginning of a friendship, while for others it symbolises an imbalanced relationship. Some recognised the need in others to feel important. From the accounts of these students, it was also clear that sighted students did not constantly desire to help blind students. They were openly or systematically avoided by their sighted peers: 'Many students and other people simply take no notice of me or forget about me. But others simply walk with me and left me after a brief time without sufficient reason. As a blind person, people are not going to start talking to me' [Lemlem].

Participants stated that reactions of sighted people towards the distinction of blind students bring out feelings of shame about their blindness. As can be expected, according to participants, the shame and exclusion of blind students can lead to thoughts of worthlessness: 'I know the feeling. I know the feeling of being treated like an alien. Like it feels like you are not sufficient. You were not created by the same God that they were created by' [Alemnesh]. In general, participants reported that being cared for differently leads them to feelings of shame, inferiority, and exclusion.

### 3.4.2 Sense of accomplishment and pride

Back in my community, there are no blind people who join school like me. And sighted people said, are you going to school? You are wasting your time. But I go like sighted children. Wow, now I am at this university and will graduate after a few months. Some of the children with whom I used to go to school dropped out in grade 9; some were only able to finish grade 10. But wow, I did even better than some of the sighted students. I am proud of myself. Because throughout the years ... [I] went through ups and downs. I am still doing [the] best things... . Something that can be used as a tool to win and make my future bright. [Alemaz]

Alemaz feels that she was not given any form of encouragement in her past school years, nor did she receive sufficient support even in her tertiary education. Being a female, living with blindness, and being a university student, participants said that in the social environment where they are considered less competent, they overcome obstacles and emerge resilient and successful academically. Aster is now a few months from graduation and stated, 'Currently, I know how to approach and manage things thanks to my previous experience that gave me valuable lessons; no one can treat me as they did before.' Sisayenesh also commented,

After many ups and downs, I am about to graduate from this university. In our country, graduating from a university as a woman by itself is considered a great achievement. Being a woman and blind, overcoming all the challenges you face within this university campus and graduating, is exciting and a source of pride.

The participants felt proud and resilient that they are studying at a higher learning institution. Here, they obtained self-confidence in their ability to overcome the challenges they encountered. For instance, Berhan stated, 'Look, it would have been good if there was not so much effort, but I sense you can feel good about yourself if you conquer all the barriers and the challenges posed by university education.' Participants' pride lay in the fact that, unlike other blind persons in their community, they are making a better future for themselves, and they now have a few months left before graduating from this university.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

While analysing the data, I identified attitudes of the general social environment, institutional provisions, and learning and social environments as major themes. Campus accessibility, disability support service, accessing course materials, reading experience, assessment experiences, interaction with people, and a sense of accomplishment and pride emerged as sub-themes.

Blind female students experienced the negative views of the larger social groups in the university campus regarding their capacity to achieve the traditional university student expectations, putting their capability under question as competent university students and viewing them as weak and dependent on others in their lives. The denial and lower expectations in their having the potential to perform various requirements of courses like any other students and playing the role of university students and the disbelief of others towards their ability to handle university education and the campus environment have been mentioned in the interviews as their lived experiences. This unfavourable experience of blind female students that emanates from the negative attitudes of the larger social group can also be observed in the classmates' and teachers' initial responses when they interacted with them as students and included stating their doubts. The thoughts of people about the ideal university student are also seen in their expectations of whether the student can manage the university environment and the demands of higher education. Participants also experienced and developed some kind of fear due to the unfavourable reactions and suggestions of their classmates and subject teachers.

However, the participants have identified themselves as resilient university students and considered university education as a crucial aspect of their lives. Differences between blind female students' perceptions of their abilities and their experiences with sighted people's views about them were conspicuous in the interviews. While the participants perceive and define themselves as university students when they talk to sighted people, the general social environment, depending on the response they got from them, primarily viewed them as incompetent to accomplish the demands of higher education and denied them the expectation of being competent university students. In the interviews, it seemed that both the general social environment of the university and its key components, such as teachers, denied them such a role and held lower expectations for them.

Participants were dedicated to succeeding in their education by overcoming unfavourable attitudes of people on the university campus. They came to the university assuming that there would not be more challenges in the university than the barriers they had faced during their primary and secondary school times, and they convinced themselves that even if they faced the same or more challenges, they would be able to handle them. In addition, these students have developed coping strategies in the face of previously experiencing people's negative attitudes and difficult school environments, so they are less fearful when they come to the university, as they feel they have the required coping knowledge and skills. Of course, like other freshman students, they were anxious about the pressures that a university education would put on them. When they enrolled and started attending classes, they found that what they experienced fell short of their expectations and left them with mixed feelings. Their concerns about the teaching and learning process are related to the lack of disability-specific support in the university and teachers' teaching methods. The teaching methods and teaching aids used by the teachers did not take into account the special needs of the blind and did not allow them to participate in the lessons offered. They were afraid that they would be unsuccessful in this kind of learning environment.

It is essential to mention that being a female, blind, and university students were issues of concern that were emphasised by all participants during the interview. They cited all three things (blind, female, and university student) as their self-identified identity. This made them live a life full of hope and to struggle for what they could achieve by overcoming challenges that require a lot of effort and sacrifices from them as blind female students in the university. There are many cultural prejudices and stereotypes against women and disabilities in Ethiopia. In addition, university education requires a lot of effort and dedication. These students felt honoured and proud that they had faced all these challenges and succeeded. Cultural stereotypes view females and people with disabilities, especially those with blindness, as weak and consider them unable to shoulder the burdens of a university-level education (Genet, Kumar & Sulphrey 2021).

Blind female students experienced biased attitudes of the majority of people in the university in that they do not expect that they will learn and be successful in university education, but few teachers and students believe that these students are like any other students and support them. Of course, the necessary support for blind students in general and for blind female students in particular in a society like Ethiopia that has a culture of looking at females as inferior should be provided at all levels of education (Al-Zboon, Ahmad & Theeb 2014). While institutions of higher education are required to provide the necessary support to students with visual disabilities, the support provided to these students was difficult for them to imagine, for it was below what they expected to receive from Bahir Dar University, one of the well-known higher learning institutions in Ethiopia (Beyene, Mekonnen & Giannoumis 2020).

Interviews revealed that the reactions of members of the university community to them and their attitudes and expectations concerning their ability to manage themselves and the demands of higher education have a substantial impact on their self-confidence and their expectations of sighted people. The undesirable responses forwarded from students, instructors, and admin staff members, which enquire about their fitness for university studentship and their capability to realise the role of competent students, were plainly found in the participants' interviews, and, fortunately, all these reactions of the sighted people could not break their sense of competence and did not influence their everyday lives. By trusting themselves and ignoring the negative feedback, they continue to be resilient and prove themselves as hardworking and successful students by overcoming challenges posed by their social and physical environments. The interview accounts show that they experienced a great deal of satisfaction and pride as they were successful in their education amidst such adverse situations.

Being able to cope with the challenges they face and being successful are the sources of their sense of accomplishment, and pride is a key theme in the participants' lives. The fact that these students have been overcoming the risk factors they have faced at various levels of their environments with their strength and courage since childhood has helped them to overcome the many challenges and obstacles they have faced in the university and enabled them to be successful (Genet, Kumar & Sulphrey 2021; Zegeye 2020). It was not external proactive factors (support services from people in the university) but rather their internal protective resources that were mentioned as the main reasons for their resilient and successful lives on the university campus.

In addition to the immediate classmates' and instructors' low expectations, the general social environment on the university campus was more dubious of them as good university students; basically, they could only see the blind students in general and blind female students in particular as being unable to carry out the demands of university education or to manage their lives independently in the university environment. The participants narrated several instances where they encountered prejudice and marginalisation. They experienced people's illogical disability and gender stereotypes that assume that the demands and requirements of a university education need a person with normal mental and physical conditions. This stereotypical expectation is not applied to students with disabilities in general or blind female students in particular (Goode 2007).

As if such stereotyped attitudes of classmates and subject teachers are not enough, admin staff in university campus offices (e.g., registrar, student service, cafeteria) also showed their disbelief concerning their university studentship capabilities and suggested they find some

easier job instead of wasting time at the university, believing that they may be dismissed at the end of their freshman year. That these staff members concentrated on the impacts of being blind and female (Mulugeta 2017), which could restrict them in handling the environment and demands of university education, appeared in the interviews. The provision of disability-specific support and orienting them to the physical environment of the campus were not experienced by the participants.

In the university, the questions asked by students about the provision of disability support and the readjustment and modification of the physical barriers were ignored. Modification and adaption of lessons, teaching methods, teaching aids and materials, and assessment of learning, tasks expected to be done by instructors in the teaching and learning process, were not assured (Mulugeta 2017). A lack of the timely provision of reading materials and lecture notes was also evident in the interview. Due to this, the students have a shortage of time to read the course materials and prepare for exams, which made them busy and frustrated. These challenges emanated from the teaching-learning process that could have been managed by instructors, making these students exert extra effort and time to read; reading appears in the interviews as one of the tiresome tasks and undesirable experiences. Though participants were not able to get the expected support from the majority of their instructors and students, the presence of very few instructors and students that provided support for them is evident in the interviews. Participants witnessed that the individuals who have a positive attitude towards them and supported them beyond what is expected of them have an important place in their lives. It can be asserted then that the support for students with blindness by a few minority university staff shows the ideal level of support that could have been practiced by the university campus.

The results of the present study strengthened the view that in the current context of Bahir Dar University, students who do not meet the social stereotypes of competent university students are not provided adequate support, and the special needs of these students are denied. The fight against those prejudices that would hinder these students from exercising their right to education like non-disabled students and obtaining appropriate support services is a crucial issue in the lives of blind female students. The participants felt a duty to struggle for the right provisions of support for students with disabilities and tried to request that the university provide them relevant support services on different occasions.


## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I can say that while participants underlined their identity as competent blind female students when identifying themselves, their attitudes show the inaccessibility of the university campus environment and the unfavourable attitudes of the majority of people, which would typically deny them the status of good and competent university students. Proper disability support services are not found on the university campus as an institution nor among the majority of its members. However, a kind of ideal support is revealed in the attitudes and practices of a few members of the university campus. Thus, the notion of being good university students, as defined by the majority of people, was managed through their resilience, resourcefulness, and initiative for success and the support of a few persons on the university campus. From the perspective of the right to get equitable services, blind female students who participated in this study should have been provided with relevant support services.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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