

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on People with Disabilities and its Implications on Special Education Practice in Nigeria

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Abstract:- The advent of Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Nigeria. While the pandemic threatens every person in the country, it is significantly impacting millions of people with disabilities as a result of their pre-existing conditions. This paper highlights the consequential impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on people with disabilities in Nigeria viz income support, gender base violence, difficulties in accessing health services, and support from caregivers due to isolation, social distancing and the lockdown measures. It also presents the Covid-19 impact on the education of people with disabilities and implications to special education programme in Nigeria. The paper offers recommendations for government to respond to these challenges both now and in the future.

Keywords:- Covid-19, People with Disabilities, Assistive technology, Special Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of a respiratory disease otherwise known as Covid-19 started in the Wuhan province of the Peoples' Republic of China in December, 2019 has developed to a large scale pandemic disease affecting not only humans' health, but also the education and the economy of many countries across the globe. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) to be a pandemic, due to the nature, speed and scale of transmission.

In order to contain the Covid-19 outbreak, WHO, health authorities and governments of different countries around the world have taken actions, which gave way for the implementation of measures such as minimizing mass gatherings, suspension of both local and international flights, closure of borders, recreational centres, schools, libraries, businesses, religious and sporting activities, strict city surveillance and enforced quarantines and isolations in large scales (Fong et al., 2020; Galea et al., 2020).

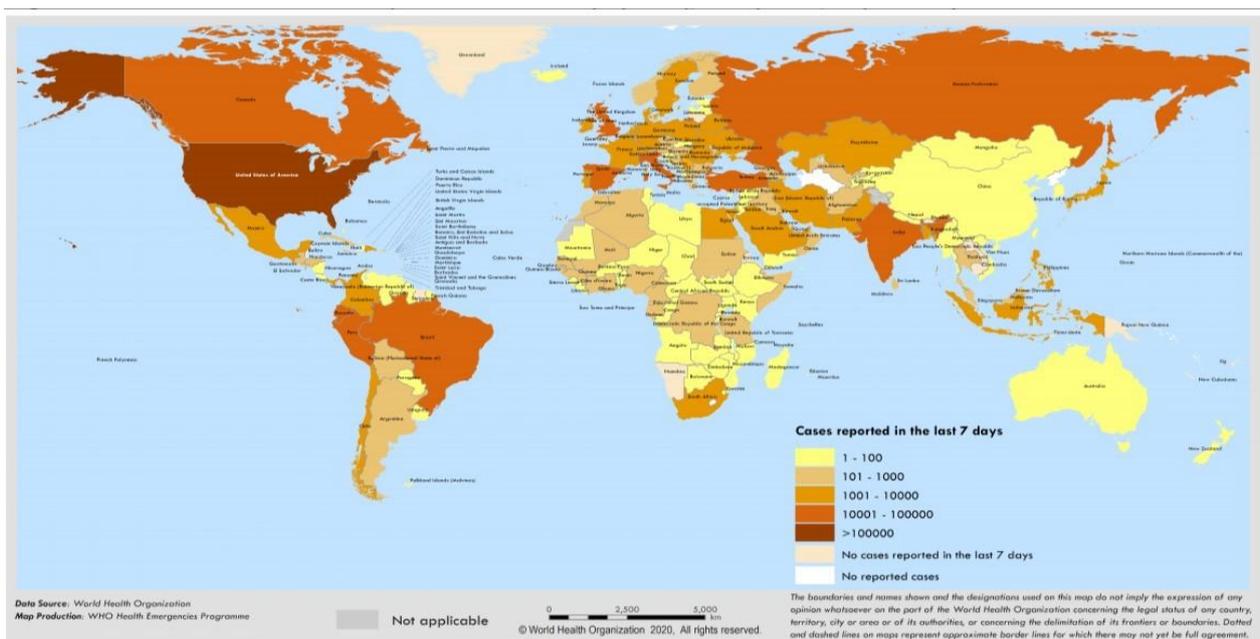


Fig 1:- Number of confirmed Covid-19 cases reported by country, territory or area, between April-May 2020
Source: WHO (2020).

Specifically, in Nigeria, since the detection of the first case of COVID-19 on 27th February, 2020, the federal government has taken precautionary measures to discourage mass gathering and encourage social distancing in order to limit the spread of the virus. Despite all these efforts, Covid-19 continues spreading in many states of Nigeria, threatening all members of society. However, certain segments of the populations, such as people with disabilities are impacted more significantly by the pandemic. People with Disabilities includes all persons who have long-time physical, mental, emotional, or sensory impairments, whose interaction with the different attitudinal and environmental barriers prevent them from full and or effective performance within the society on an

equal basis with others (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: CRPD, 2016).

In fact, over 25 million persons with disabilities in Nigeria are disproportionately impacted due to barriers to implementing basic protection measures such as difficulties in washing hands, difficulties in observing social distance due to reliance on physical contact to get support, the need to touch surfaces of assistive products for support, barriers to accessing public health information, hygiene and institutional barriers that are reproduced during the COVID-19 crisis (Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities :JONAWPD, 2020; WHO, 2020).

This article on the consequential impact of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities in Nigeria will raise awareness and prompt better responses from the government and other stakeholders that can help to mitigate the challenges faced by this segment of the population. Specifically, the paper assesses:

- a. Impact of Covid-19 on the socio-economic well-being of people with disabilities in Nigeria.
- b. Impact of Covid-19 on the education of people with disabilities in Nigeria.
- c. Implications to special education practice in Nigeria.

II. HOW COVID-19 IMPACTS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA

While having a disability does not probably place someone at a higher risk of contacting the Covid-19, people with disabilities generally have more health-care needs than those without disabilities (United Nation: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). In fact, many could have underlying health challenges as secondary aspect of their disability that could suppress immune system and make them more vulnerable and susceptible to contracting the virus. They may be at greater risk of developing more severe cases if they become infected with COVID-19 disease (WHO, 2020).

To many people with disabilities in Nigeria, access to support services from caregivers will significantly lead to safe, healthy and independent living. Furthermore, persons with disabilities who are dependent on support from caregivers for their daily living may find themselves forcefully isolated and thus be unable to survive the social distance and lockdown measures during the COVID-19 crisis.

Before the advent of COVID-19, people with disabilities are not opportune to experience qualitative health services in Nigeria. Lack of better health services for the people with disabilities in Nigeria makes them vulnerable to Covid-19 disease. Despite being the segment of the population that is particularly at-risk to Contracting Covid-19 and developing severe cases if infected with COVID-19 disease; persons with disabilities in developing countries like Nigeria face even greater difficulty in accessing healthcare services and information, medical guidelines and protocols that may possibly minimize the risk level of contacting Covid-19 (United Nations: UN, 2020; Olapegba et al., 2020).

United Nations' Human Rights at the Heart of Response document suggested that people with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged by the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 and access to measures to control the pandemic. Nigerians with disabilities have less access to social insurance than others when considering their employment status. This may have an effect on their economic resilience in the current COVID-19 crisis (World Bank Group, 2020). Those who are self-employed may be prevented from working from home during lockdown due to the absence of equipment and support and thus face increased risks of losing their income and livelihood. This lack of income represents a disproportionate burden on persons with disabilities and their households which typically face extra costs and expenditures related to their disabilities (UNICEF, 2020). Equally, the economic impact of COVID-19 may likely bite harder within existing services in the post-pandemic period (World Bank Group, 2020).

Nigerians with disabilities, who live in slumps areas where physical distancing is hard to comply with due to their living arrangements, are in the danger of contacting Covid-19 disease. The homeless among them and those living in emergency settlements (like the Internally Displaced Peoples' Camps) are particularly vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 on account of overcrowded living conditions, lack of access to water and sanitation, and due to their pre-existing health conditions (Nigeria in Emergencies Working Group: EIEWG, 2020).

Before the advent of Covid-19, Nigeria has been experiencing gender-based violence crisis, which are associated with harmful social, cultural, traditional and religious practices (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons: NAPTIP, 2020). However, this crisis has become pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, with widespread evidence that the crisis has

significantly increased since the beginning of the lockdown due to the pandemic (UN, 2020). Initial data on reported incidents of this crisis in just 23 states in Nigeria shows that between March-April 2020, the total number of incidents reported sharply spiked from 346 to 794, indicating a fifty-six percent (56%) increase in just two weeks of lockdown (UN Women, 2020). Although, information on disability and gender based violence in the context of COVID-19 is not currently available, however, experience revealed by NAPTIP and United Nations indicated that the

circumstances of Covid-19 lockdown may have a peculiar impact on women and girls with disabilities. For women and girls with disabilities stand the risk of facing even higher rates of gender, sexual and domestic violence compared to other women (WHO, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to note that reporting domestic violence and sexual harassment may particularly be challenging for women in Nigeria, talk less of women with disabilities (Yusuf, 2020).

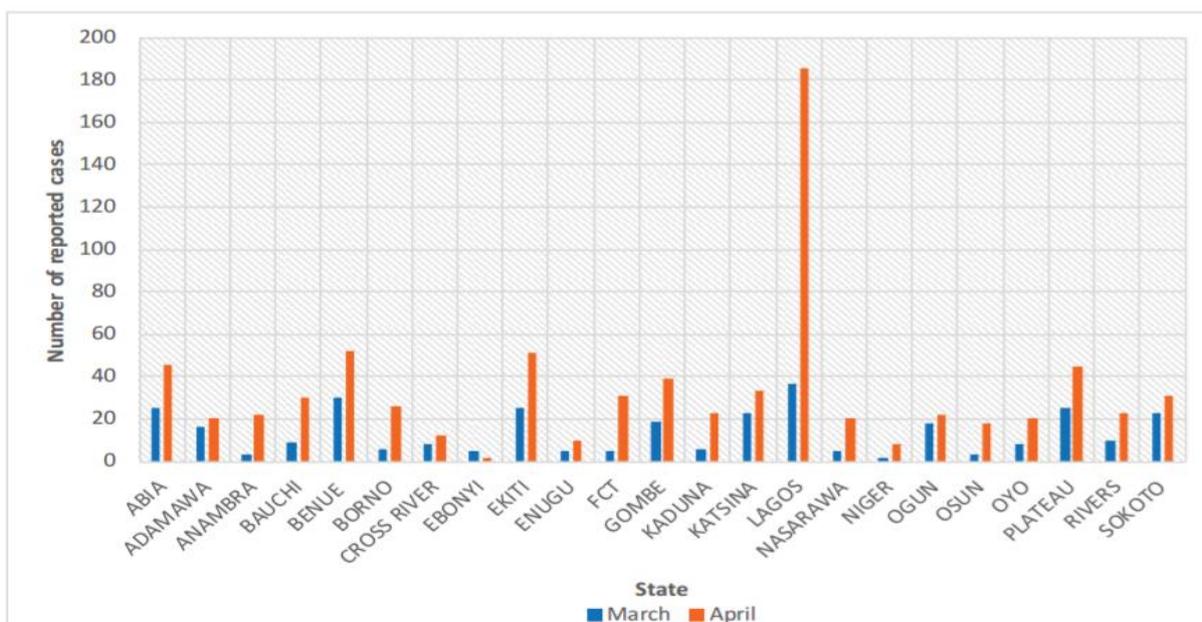


Fig 2:- Increased number of reported cases of gender-based violence from 23 states in Nigeria between March-April 2020
Source: UN Nigeria

People with disabilities usually have greater health requirements and poorer health outcomes (UN, 2020). As was observed by the researchers, in Nigeria most isolation, health and transport facilities used as part of the COVID-19 response have no adequate provision to cater to the requirements of Nigerians with disabilities, which may be infected with Covid-19 disease. The pandemic and the related containment measures such as quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation may have disruptions to the health services people with disabilities rely on. These posed barriers to accessing healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis, making timely and appropriate care difficult for persons with disabilities. This has detrimental impact on their health needs.

Many of these functional consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects on individuals with disabilities. These challenges may even be significant for the people with disabilities living in informal settlements and those in IDP camps as a result of humanitarian emergencies. Awareness of these challenges may lead to better responses that can reduce the disproportionate impact experienced by persons with disabilities.

III. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EDUCATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In Nigeria, while COVID19 is primarily affecting public health, its effects on education are so enormous and are arising largely from extended school closures. In essence, the lives of not less than 46 million students and their families have been significantly affected by the school closures caused by the covid-19 outbreak (EIEWG, 2020). The EIEWG, maintained further that out of the 4.6 million affected students, 4.2 million were the most vulnerable groups of children, including people with disabilities who are likely to be impacted the most. Although, most state governments have responded by the implementation of remote learning, largely on states TV stations to ensure that students continue to study. However, this measure does not address the educational needs of all students, arising from discontinuity and disruption of schools (Albino Foundation, 2020).

Students with disability represent a diverse population of people with different forms of impairments and care support requirements, which face significant barriers that expanded their exclusion from education, especially during crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic (Agnoletto & Queiroz, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Currently, in Nigeria due to lack of

disaggregated data and information on social statistics, it is quite unclear as to how many students with disabilities are receiving educational support as a result of extended suspension of schools due to Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, how to keep learning in disruption for this category of students has become a major challenge to both the federal and state ministries of education, who are operating a special education system that was already incapacitated as a result of underfunding and lack of

political will before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic (Dominic, et al, 2020).

Students with disabilities may be negatively affected by the school shutdown, as they stand the risk of exclusion from education, when states continue to implement online distance learning programmes that may not be accessible to them, since they do not have necessary assistive devices that may allow participation and accommodation base on their unique learning needs (UNESCO, 2020).

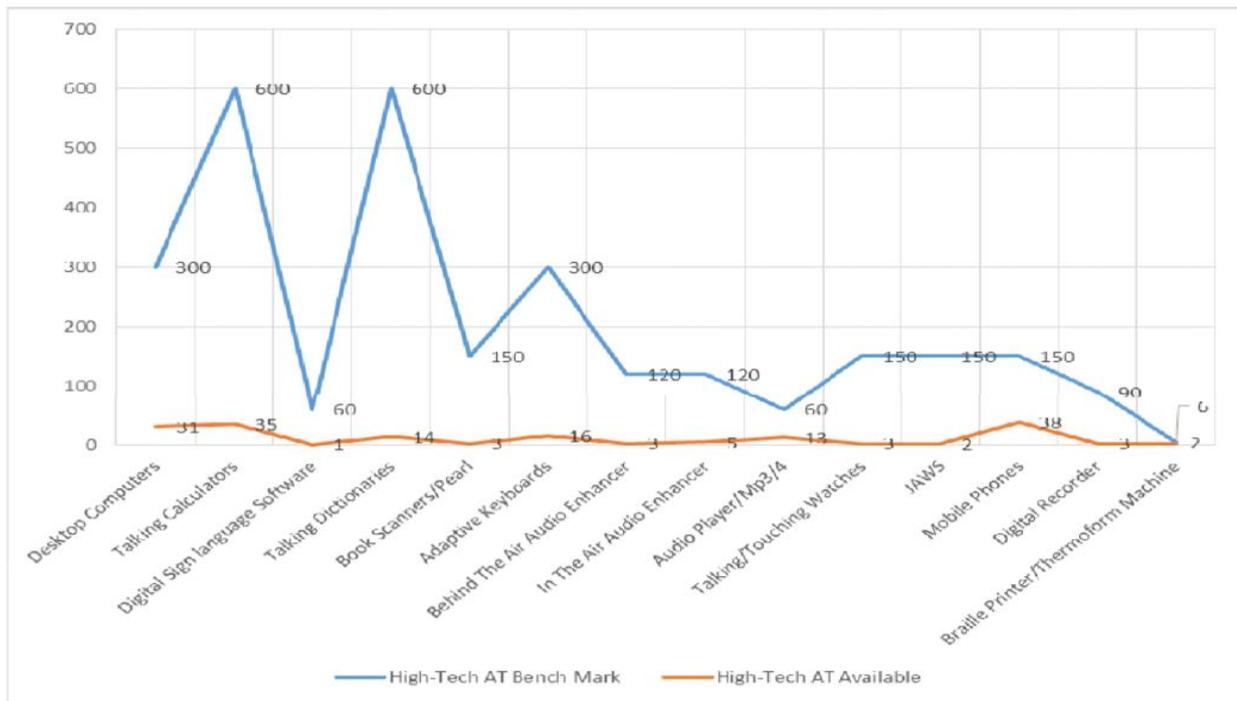


Fig 3:- Graphic representation of assistive technology resources available in special education schools in Nigeria. Source: Dominic et al. (2020)

Furthermore, special education teachers’ lack of Information and Communication Technology skills in Nigeria makes them unprepared to teach online and with high-tech learning platforms and resources; and therefore, cannot ensure students with disabilities’ engagement, during interrupted classes due to Covid-19 (Chukwuemeka & Dominic, 2020). Lack of support and access to the internet, accessible software and hardware learning materials is likely to widen the gap for students with disabilities (UN: Policy Brief on Disability Inclusive Response to Covid-19, 2020). Hence, an online approach is not always ideal for creating an inclusive learning environment (UNICEF, 2020).

Extended school closures and disengagement of students with disability from the learning process could result in an increased risk of dropout for people with disabilities, particularly those from lower income households. This will present a greater challenge to Nigerian government and its aim of reducing the out of school children and street begging, which is pronounced in the northern part of the country.

IV. IMPLICATIONS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Considering the suddenness of the Covid-19 crisis and its impact to the Education system, it clearly appears that response is a matter of urgency. Governments and institutions worldwide began to shift their school programmes to online distance education platforms (Toquero, 2020). The reason for the adoption of massive online learning programme is that it does not require instructors and students to come together for the face to face interaction; therefore, there is prevention and control over the spread of the virus (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020).

In Nigeria, as a way of mitigating the pedagogical and policy impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on the education system, both the federal and the state governments have since commenced education on TV and Radio stations largely for the elementary and secondary education. This may not serve for instance, students with visual, hearing or intellectual impairments if it is not provided in multiple and accessible format (Albino Foundation, 2020). To effectively respond to the threat of the pandemic on special

education, government need to reassess the curricular interventions for students with disabilities in order to gear up readiness towards meeting their learning needs. This will require aligning the competencies of students with the online format or any other provision put in place to ensure continuous learning.

As institutions continue to shift to the online alternative, these online platforms can present barriers to the special education teachers since they do not acquire the required ICT-driven competencies in planning and implementing instruction as well as assessing and reporting the performance of their students online (Chukwuemeka & Dominic, 2020). Thus, it is difficult for these teachers to effectively assist in the implementation of special education electronically. Equally, the high-tech assistive devices needed for innovative teaching and learning that the teachers can access to promote remote learning for the students with diverse educational needs are not adequately available (Dominic et al., 2020).

Extended school closures and exclusion of students with disability in the provisions for continuous learning process during the Covid-19 crisis will impact negatively on special education system and could raise the risk of disengagement and dropout of people with disabilities, particularly those from lower income households. This will present a greater challenge to Nigerian government and its aim of reducing the out of school children, street begging and violence against women and girls with disabilities, which is experienced in all parts of the country. Hence, based on the education needs of people with disabilities, this article presents opportunities in the recommendations for special education to respond to the educational problems that arise due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

V. CONCLUSION

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, which is disproportionately impacting millions of people with disabilities in Nigeria. People with disabilities are affected in varieties of ways by the enforced lockdown and social distancing measures due to Covid-19 pandemic. Many of these functional, economic, health and social consequences of the pandemic could be visible even after the Covid-19 crisis. This requires an unprecedented inclusive response that will better serve everyone.

The extension of closure of schools in Nigeria will continue to impact negatively on the special educational programme and its ability to provide flexible remote learning to the teeming population of students with diverse learning needs. Hence, the pandemic has opened up opportunities for the government to upgrade special education system by redesigning the curricular and technology needs of the changing times, and train teachers to use the emerging high-tech assistive technologies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic, the following recommendations will help government and the entire stakeholders to effectively cater for the needs of people with disabilities during these pandemic and future crises.

In order to mitigate those health challenges posed by the enforced lockdown and social distancing, there is need for the government and the entire stakeholders to provide virtual health services such as virtual medical counselling; health teleconferencing with medical staff representatives and health professionals, and other related online health services such as consultation, psychology and counselling and should be easily accessible to people with disabilities in Nigeria.

Government through the ministry of health and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control should raise awareness by providing information on COVID-19 disease and related measures of containment and make them accessible to persons with disabilities in multiple and accessible format, such as through sign language interpretation, captioning, braille and easy to read format for people with disabilities in Nigeria.

Government should ensure that caregivers and support persons are exempted from lockdown and social distancing restrictions in order to provide the needed support to people with disabilities to be able to live a normal life during the Covid-19 and future crises

Government and all stakeholders should raise awareness and provide training to curb the risk of gender-based violence faced by girls and women, especially those with disabilities and promote support networks from nongovernmental organisations.

Government and other stakeholders should provide palliative, financial aid and benefits through social insurance, soft loans and grants for medium and small scaled self-employed persons with disabilities who have lost their income and source of livelihood.

Government and the stakeholders in special education should assess the capabilities of students, teachers, and infrastructure in order to improve assistive technology solutions for students with disabilities to be able to explore various options for distance learning made available during school shutdown. Additionally, special education teachers should be trained on how to instruct and engage students with disabilities through flexible distance learning high-tech tools and ensure accessibility to the internet, and internet resources by engaging service providers to minimize internet cost.

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