

# Fostering Self-Advocacy and Independence for People with Visual Impairment in Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Self-advocacy is a critical factor in achieving independence and social inclusion for individuals with visual impairments. This study aimed to explore the experiences of individuals with visual impairments in Zimbabwe regarding self-advocacy and independence. A qualitative research design was employed. The study was grounded in social constructivist theory. The research was conducted in urban and rural areas of Zimbabwe, targeting adults aged 18 and above with visual impairments. Purposive sampling was used to select 14 participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding and identifying key themes emerging from participants' narratives. Findings revealed that education, employment, and assistive technology were key enablers of self-advocacy and independence. However, societal discrimination, lack of awareness about disability rights, and financial constraints were significant challenges. Participants highlighted the need for inclusive education policies, workplace accommodations, and increased access to assistive technology to enhance their independence. The study concludes that while self-advocacy is essential for visually impaired individuals, its success depends on policy interventions, public awareness, and resource availability.

**Keywords:** Visual Impairment, Self-Advocacy, Independence

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, approximately 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the world's population, experience significant disabilities. These individuals often face challenges such as limited access to education, employment, and healthcare, as well as societal stigma and discrimination.

Among these disabilities, visual impairment significantly impacts daily life. Vision loss negatively impacts quality of life, independence, and mobility. It has also been associated with increased risk of falls, injuries, mental health issues, cognitive decline, social difficulties, and reduced opportunities in employment and education (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Individuals with visual impairments encounter difficulties in performing routine tasks, navigating public spaces, and accessing printed or digital information. These challenges can lead to feelings of isolation and dependency.

To overcome these obstacles, self-advocacy and independence are crucial. Self-advocacy empowers visually impaired individuals to effectively communicate their needs, make informed decisions, and assert their rights. Developing these skills fosters autonomy and enhances participation in various aspects of society.

Switzerland and Norway are known for their strong support systems for people with disabilities. Both countries provide inclusive education, financial support, and advanced assistive technology. This means that people with disabilities, including those with visual impairments, have better access to education, jobs, and daily services. In Norway, the government has policies that ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities, including those with visual impairments. These policies focus on making schools, workplaces,

and public spaces more accessible so that people with disabilities can fully participate in society (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2022). This support helps visually impaired individuals gain the skills they need for employment and live more independently. Switzerland also has well-developed mobility and employment programs to help visually impaired people become more independent. These programs provide special training, assistive devices, and workplace support to ensure that individuals can work and move around more easily in their communities (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2023). This approach not only improves their quality of life but also allows them to contribute meaningfully to society.

In India, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government programs work to support people with visual impairments. These efforts include providing education, assistive technology, and job training. However, despite these programs, many visually impaired individuals still face challenges, especially in rural areas. Schools and workplaces are often not fully equipped to meet their needs, making it harder for them to learn and find jobs. The situation is even more difficult in villages and small towns, where there are fewer resources and less awareness about disability rights. Many families do not know what support is available, and visually impaired individuals may struggle to advocate for themselves. Without proper education and job opportunities, they often depend on family members for support, limiting their independence (National Institute for the Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities, 2023). Increasing awareness and improving access to resources could help them lead more independent and fulfilling lives.

In Ghana, there are efforts to promote the rights and independence of people with disabilities. The government and organizations work to create policies that support education, job opportunities, and accessibility. However, in reality, many people with disabilities still face challenges in their daily lives. Schools and workplaces are not always designed to accommodate their needs, making it harder for them to learn skills and find stable jobs. For visually impaired individuals, the lack of accessible learning materials and assistive technology makes education even more difficult. Many employers are also hesitant to hire people with disabilities, believing they may not be able to perform certain tasks. As a result, many visually impaired individuals struggle to become financially independent and rely on family support (Ghana Federation of Disability Organizations, 2022). More awareness and better policies could help improve their chances of education and employment, allowing them to fully participate in society.

In Ethiopia, a study at the University of Gondar found that blind students face difficulties in speaking up for their rights. One of the main reasons is that they do not have enough knowledge about disability policies and self-advocacy skills. Without this awareness, they struggle to demand better learning materials, accessible classrooms, and equal opportunities in education. Many blind students also lack support systems that could guide them in understanding their rights. Schools and universities may not provide enough training or resources to help them become more independent. As a result, they often remain silent when facing discrimination or barriers in education (Mengesha et al., 2023). Teaching self-advocacy skills and increasing awareness about disability rights could help these students gain confidence and push for better inclusion in society.

In Zimbabwe, organizations such as Sightsavers work to reduce preventable blindness and support people with visual impairments. These organizations help by providing training, employment opportunities, and assistive devices (Sightsavers, 2023). However, many challenges remain. There is still limited access to education, assistive technology, and social support, which prevents many visually impaired individuals from achieving full independence. Many also struggle with negative societal attitudes, making it difficult for them to advocate for themselves.

Despite these initiatives, challenges persist in fostering self-advocacy and independence among individuals with visual impairments in Zimbabwe. Limited access to resources, societal attitudes, and insufficient support systems continue to impede their full participation in society. While progress has been made in various regions, there remains a critical need to promote self-advocacy and independence among individuals with visual impairments, particularly in developing countries. This study aims to explore the importance of

self-advocacy and independence among individuals with visual impairments in Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Lee, Reddie, and Carroll (2021) highlight both internal and social aspects of independence, which is important, but their discussion remains broad. While they mention the role of technology and social interactions, they do not explore the specific barriers that people with visual impairments face when accessing assistive technology. A more detailed analysis of real-life challenges and potential solutions would strengthen their argument.

Runo (2012) provides a Kenya-specific perspective on independent living, which is useful. However, the study focuses mainly on theoretical ideals such as self-determination and equal opportunities without offering concrete examples of how these are achieved in real-world settings. The call for functional skills training and transition programs is valid, but the effectiveness of existing programs remains unclear. More data on implementation and impact would add weight to the argument.

Agran, Hong, and Blankenship (2007) explore self-determination education, a crucial area for fostering independence. However, their work mostly highlights the role of teachers, overlooking the voices of students themselves. Understanding the lived experiences of students with visual impairments would provide a richer perspective on what works and what does not in self-determination education.

Bagga (2023) makes a strong case for self-efficacy and self-advocacy in career maturity. The study rightly emphasizes the role of inclusive policies and assistive technology but does not critically examine whether current policies and technologies are meeting the needs of students with visual impairments. Additionally, the study assumes that self-efficacy alone is enough to ensure career success, but external barriers such as workplace discrimination and accessibility challenges should also be considered.

Norris (2024) discusses self-determination skills in transition planning, a key factor in fostering independence. However, the study lacks depth in addressing the systemic barriers that hinder students with disabilities from fully applying these skills. While goal setting and informed decision-making are vital, there is little discussion on how institutions, policies, and societal attitudes impact the transition process.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** This study employed a qualitative research design to gather in-depth insights into the experiences of individuals with visual impairments regarding self-advocacy and independence. The research utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of individuals with visual impairments. This approach allowed for an exploration of personal narratives and the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences of self-advocacy.

**Target Population:** The target population consisted of adults aged 18 and above who have visual impairments residing in urban and rural areas of Zimbabwe. Participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences related to self-advocacy.

**Sampling Techniques:** Purposive sampling was employed to ensure a diverse representation of participants. This technique allowed the researchers to select individuals who could provide rich, relevant information regarding the challenges and successes associated with self-advocacy. A total of 14 participants were selected for the study. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research typically involves 5 to 25 participants, depending on the depth of inquiry and the study's objectives. Given the focus on self-advocacy among visually impaired individuals, this sample size was sufficient to provide meaningful insights while ensuring comprehensive data collection and analysis.

**Measures:** Data collection instruments included interview guides developed based on existing literature on self-advocacy and independence. The guides contained open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses from participants about their experiences.

**Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from interviews and focus groups. This involved coding the data into themes that emerged from participants' narratives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing self-advocacy among individuals with visual impairments.

**Ethical Considerations:** The study adhered to strict ethical research standards to protect participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained by providing participants with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, ensuring they voluntarily signed consent forms before participation. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all personal information, using pseudonyms, and securely storing data accessible only to the research team. Participation was entirely voluntary, with individuals free to withdraw at any stage without facing any negative consequences. Additionally, the study was conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect for the experiences of individuals with visual impairments, ensuring their voices were accurately represented.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study included 14 participants with visual impairments residing in Harare Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe. To ensure diversity, participants were purposefully selected based on age, gender, education level, employment status, and experience with self-advocacy. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55 years, with an equal representation of males and females (7 each). In terms of education, 4 participants had primary-level education, 6 had secondary-level education, and 4 had attained tertiary-level education. Regarding employment status, 5 participants were formally employed, 3 were self-employed, and 6 were unemployed. Additionally, 5 participants were actively engaged in advocacy groups, while 9 had minimal to no involvement in self-advocacy initiatives.

## FINDINGS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The first question required participants to provide their perspectives on self-advocacy as a tool for empowerment and independence. The themes that emerged were self-empowerment, societal stigma, and structural barriers.

**Self-Empowerment:** Many participants highlighted that self-advocacy played a crucial role in enabling them to assert their rights and gain independence. They emphasized that being able to communicate their needs and navigate societal structures was essential in achieving autonomy. Participants conveyed:

*"Self-advocacy has helped me demand my rights in different spaces where people assume I am incapable. It has given me the confidence to speak up in workplaces, public institutions, and social gatherings. I no longer hesitate to request accommodations or challenge unfair treatment, knowing that my voice matters."* (Participant P03, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024)

*"Speaking up for myself has given me the confidence to handle situations that used to intimidate me. Now, I can assert my needs without fear, knowing that I deserve the same opportunities and respect as everyone else."* (Participant P07, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024)

**Societal Stigma:** Some participants expressed frustration over the negative perceptions of visually impaired individuals, which hindered their self-advocacy efforts. They noted that many people assume they are incapable of making independent decisions, leading to exclusion in various aspects of life. Some voiced:



*"People often make decisions on my behalf without even consulting me, assuming I cannot think for myself. It's frustrating because they overlook my abilities and preferences, making me feel invisible in matters that directly affect my life. I wish more people understood that I am capable of making my own choices and just need the right support, not pity or control."* (Participant P05, Personal Communication, March 15, 2024)

*"It is difficult to advocate for yourself when society does not see you as an equal. No matter how much I speak up, people still underestimate my abilities and make assumptions about what I can or cannot do. The lack of inclusion in education, employment, and social spaces makes it even harder to be heard. Sometimes, it feels like I have to work twice as hard just to prove that I deserve the same opportunities as everyone else."* (Participant P09, Personal Communication, March 16, 2024)

**Structural Barriers:** Several participants noted that while policies exist to support self-advocacy and independence, their weak implementation limits effectiveness. Accessibility challenges in public spaces and services further exacerbate these difficulties. Participants expressed:

*"There are laws that are meant to protect our rights, but they are rarely enforced. Many policies exist on paper, yet in reality, we still face discrimination in schools, workplaces, and public spaces. Without proper implementation and accountability, these laws remain ineffective, leaving us to struggle for inclusion and equal opportunities. It is frustrating to know that our rights are recognized legally but not upheld in practice."* (Participant P11, Personal Communication, March 17, 2024)

*"Many places are not designed for people with visual impairments, making independence very difficult. Simple tasks like navigating streets, using public transportation, or accessing buildings become daily challenges due to poor accessibility and lack of inclusive infrastructure."* (Participant P06, Personal Communication, March 18, 2024)

The second question explored participants' views on the role of education in fostering self-advocacy and independence. The themes that emerged were education as an enabler, limited access to education, and the role of assistive learning tools.

**Education as an Enabler:** Participants agreed that education was key to self-advocacy, as it equipped them with knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate life independently. Participants revealed:

*"Education is the foundation of self-advocacy. Without knowledge, it is difficult to demand your rights. When we are informed about policies, accessibility options, and available support systems, we can confidently speak up for ourselves and challenge discrimination. However, without proper education, many remain unaware of their rights and opportunities, making it harder to fight for inclusion and equal treatment."* (Participant P08, Personal Communication, March 19, 2024)

*"Learning braille and other skills helped me communicate better and advocate for myself. It gave me the confidence to read independently, write without assistance, and express my thoughts clearly. With these skills, I no longer feel left out in conversations or dependent on others for information, allowing me to navigate the world with greater self-reliance and dignity."* (Participant P04, Personal Communication, March 20, 2024)

**Limited Access to Education:** Some participants highlighted the challenges they faced in accessing education, citing inadequate schools for individuals with visual impairments and financial constraints. Participants mentioned:

*"I wanted to pursue further education, but opportunities are limited for people like us. Many institutions lack the necessary accommodations, such as accessible learning materials and trained instructors. Even when opportunities exist, financial constraints and societal perceptions create additional barriers, making it difficult to achieve our full potential."* (Participant P12, Personal Communication, March 21, 2024)

*"Many schools do not have resources for visually impaired learners, making it difficult for us to succeed. There is a lack of braille textbooks, assistive technology, and trained teachers who understand our needs. As a result, we often struggle to keep up with our peers, and many of us are forced to drop out due to these challenges."* (Participant P02, Personal Communication, March 22, 2024)

**Role of Assistive Learning Tools:** The use of assistive learning tools, such as braille and screen readers, was seen as transformative in fostering independence. However, affordability and accessibility remained significant challenges. Participants expressed:

*"Using screen readers has changed my life. I can now access information without relying on others, which has given me a sense of independence and confidence. I can read books, browse the internet, and even complete work-related tasks without assistance. This technology has opened doors that were once closed to me, allowing me to stay informed and connected with the world around me."* (Participant P10, Personal Communication, March 23, 2024)

*"The challenge is that assistive technology is expensive, and not everyone can afford it."* (Participant P13, Personal Communication, March 24, 2024)

The third question sought to understand the impact of employment on self-advocacy and independence. The themes that emerged were financial independence, employment discrimination, and limited job opportunities.

**Financial Independence:** Employed participants expressed how financial independence allowed them to make personal choices and advocate for their needs without relying on others. Participants highlighted:

*"Having a job means I can support myself and make my own decisions, giving me a sense of dignity and independence. I no longer have to rely on family members for financial support, which has boosted my confidence. Employment also allows me to contribute to society, proving that people with visual impairments are just as capable as anyone else."* (Participant P01, Personal Communication, March 25, 2024)

*"When you earn your own money, you are in control of your life and can advocate for yourself better. Financial independence allows you to make decisions without relying on others, which builds confidence and self-worth. It also enables you to access necessary resources, such as assistive technology and mobility aids, further enhancing your independence. Having my own income has empowered me to challenge societal stereotypes and demand equal opportunities in the workplace and beyond."* (Participant P05, Personal Communication, March 26, 2024)

**Employment Discrimination:** Some participants shared experiences of discrimination in the job market, where employers were hesitant to hire individuals with visual impairments. Participants revealed:

*"Employers assume that we are not capable of handling certain tasks, even when we are qualified. Despite having the necessary skills and education, many of us are overlooked for job opportunities simply because of our visual impairment. It is frustrating to be judged based on assumptions rather than our actual abilities. Employers need to recognize that, with reasonable accommodations, we can perform just as well as anyone else. The real challenge is not our lack of capability but the lack of awareness and inclusive policies in many workplaces."* (Participant P06, Personal Communication, March 27, 2024)

*"I have been turned down for jobs multiple times simply because of my disability. Even though I met all the qualifications and had the necessary skills, employers often focused on my visual impairment rather than my abilities. It is disheartening to know that, despite my efforts to prove myself, many workplaces are still unwilling to give me a chance. If employers could see past my disability and recognize my potential, I know I could contribute meaningfully to the workforce. The biggest challenge is not my lack of competence but the biases that continue to exist in hiring practices."* Participant P09, Personal Communication, March 28, 2024)

**Limited Job Opportunities:** Several participants noted that there were very few job opportunities available for people with visual impairments, making it difficult for them to gain financial independence. Participants mentioned:

*"Most jobs do not accommodate people with visual impairments, so we have to rely on self-employment. Many workplaces lack the necessary assistive technology, making it difficult for us to perform tasks efficiently. Even when we qualify for positions, employers often hesitate to hire us due to misconceptions about our capabilities. As a result, we are forced to create our own opportunities, whether through small businesses, freelancing, or entrepreneurship. While self-employment gives us independence, it also comes with challenges, such as limited access to financial support and business training. If workplaces were more inclusive, more visually impaired individuals could thrive in formal employment."* (Participant P11, Personal Communication, March 29, 2024)

*"The few jobs available are highly competitive, and employers prefer hiring people without disabilities. Many companies believe that accommodating a visually impaired employee requires extra resources and effort, which they are unwilling to invest. As a result, even when we meet all the qualifications, we are often overlooked in favor of candidates without disabilities. This discourages many of us from even applying for jobs, knowing that we will likely face rejection. If employers focused on skills and provided reasonable accommodations, more visually impaired individuals could contribute meaningfully to the workforce."* (Participant P03, Personal Communication, March 30, 2024)

The fourth question examined the role of assistive technology in self-advocacy and independence. The themes that emerged were enhancing communication, improving mobility, and challenges in affordability.

**Enhancing Communication:** Participants emphasized how assistive technology had made it easier for them to communicate and access information independently. Participants expressed:

*"With assistive technology, I can send emails, read documents, and stay informed without needing help. It allows me to communicate efficiently with colleagues and friends, enhancing my productivity. I no longer have to wait for someone to assist me with reading printed materials, which gives me a sense of independence. This technology has truly transformed how I engage with the world around me."* (Participant P08, Personal Communication, March 31, 2024)

*"Screen readers have given me the freedom to interact with the world in ways that were impossible before. I can now browse the internet, access online learning materials, and even shop independently."* (Participant P12, Personal Communication, April 1, 2024)

**Improving Mobility:** Some participants highlighted how assistive devices such as white canes and navigation apps improved their ability to move around independently. Participants shared:

*"My white cane gives me confidence when walking alone, and I don't have to rely on others. It makes me feel independent and in control of my movements. I can navigate familiar places with ease. Without it, I would struggle to move around safely."* (Participant P07, Personal Communication, April 2, 2024)

*"Navigation apps have helped me travel without constantly depending on someone to guide me."* (Participant P05, Personal Communication, April 3, 2024)

**Challenges in Affordability:** Many participants emphasized that while assistive technology is transformative, its high cost makes it inaccessible to most individuals with visual impairments. They expressed frustration over the financial burden and called for greater support. Participants commented:

*"The biggest challenge is that assistive devices are too costly, making them inaccessible to many. For most individuals with visual impairments, these technologies are not just tools but necessities for daily living,*

education, and employment. However, their high prices place them out of reach for those who need them the most, forcing many to rely on family members or outdated methods to navigate life. Without financial assistance or subsidies, acquiring these essential devices remains a distant dream for many in our community." (Participant P10, Personal Communication, April 4, 2024)

"There should be more government and NGO support in making assistive technology affordable. Many visually impaired individuals have the potential to live independently and contribute meaningfully to society, but without access to affordable assistive devices, their opportunities remain severely limited." (Participant P02, Personal Communication, April 5, 2024)

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that self-advocacy is essential for empowering individuals with visual impairments and fostering their independence. However, societal stigma and structural barriers frequently obstruct their efforts to advocate for themselves effectively. Participants shared that while asserting themselves increased their confidence, they still faced widespread discrimination and misconceptions about their abilities. This is consistent with Mengesha et al. (2023), who highlight that visually impaired students in Ethiopia encounter challenges in self-advocacy due to limited awareness of disability policies and their rights.

Education emerged as a critical enabler of self-advocacy, providing individuals with the knowledge and skills to assert their rights.

Employment was identified as another crucial factor in self-advocacy and independence. Participants noted that financial stability enabled them to make independent decisions and advocate for their needs. However, employment discrimination remains a significant barrier, with many employers hesitant to hire visually impaired individuals despite their qualifications. This finding is supported by research from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016), which highlights how vision loss reduces employment opportunities and financial independence.

Assistive technology was widely acknowledged as transformative in enhancing self-advocacy and independence. However, high costs and limited availability prevent many individuals, especially in developing countries, from accessing these essential tools. This supports the argument that while assistive technology is essential, its effectiveness in fostering independence depends on affordability and accessibility.

## CONCLUSION

The findings from this study highlight that self-advocacy and independence among visually impaired individuals are influenced by various factors, including societal attitudes, education, employment, and access to assistive technology. Addressing barriers such as stigma, discrimination, and accessibility challenges can significantly enhance their ability to navigate society with confidence. Strengthening policies, increasing educational opportunities, and improving the affordability of assistive devices are essential steps toward fostering independence and self-advocacy among people with visual impairments.

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