

Societal Perception Of Hearing Impairment In Ghana: A Report On Adamorobe

George Akanlig-Pare⁴

Mary Edward⁵

Abstract

The societal perception of hearing impairment (HI)⁶ varies between communities. In Adamorobe, a community with a high incidence of genetic hearing impairment, marriages between two people with the same hearing impairment is barred by societal restrictions. This paper presents an overview of societal perception of HI in Adamorobe through the representation of marriages between HIs and the marriage law that banned unions between two HIs. It is followed by a discussion of the marriage prohibition, and the resistance from the HI against this restriction. The paper ends by presenting a case for marriage rights for HI in Adamorobe.

Keywords: *Hearing impairment, societal perception, marriage ban, stigmatization, abortions*

Introduction

Disability is a broad term that covers many impairments that affect a person's health, cognition and other areas of a person's social life. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes disability as "an evolving concept" which "results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". There are various models of disability discussed in the literature on disability studies. These include the medical model, social model, systems analysis and the transactional model

⁴ Senior Lecturer, University of Ghana, Legon.

⁵ PhD candidate, University of Brighton, UK

⁶ Hearing-impaired person/people= HI

Hearing impairment = HI

Non-impaired person/hearing people =NI

Deaf* - The term deaf or deafness is used when it is a direct quote from an author

(Llewellyn and Hogan 2000; Mark 1997). Each model presents different approaches to understanding disability. Relevant to this chapter is the social model which “locates disability not in an impaired or malfunctioning body, but in an excluding and oppressive social environment” (Mark,1997:88).

The medical model perceives “all disability as the result of some physiological impairment due to damage or to a disease process” (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000: 158). The system analysis model is particularly used among children with physical disabilities and this “involves examining the dynamics that can drive and accelerate the course of development by examining the synergistic influence of the characteristics of the person, and of the environment that produces the behavior” (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000: 160). The basics of the transactional model is the “necessity to understand the environment as an interactive structure that presents a view of individuals as active synthesisers of information from the environment” (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000: 161).

Within the social model, disability may be defined as, “the inability to perform in a way that is considered normal for a human due to a limitation in function or structure” (Titchkosky 2011:9 cited from WHO). Thus, individuals who are different by virtue of an impairment are oppressed by societal views of normality (Llewellyn and Hogan 2000). This model also perceives disability as a social construction that brings limitations on individuals with impairment. The impairment could be genetic, birth defect or the impairment can occur anytime in a person’s life. Disability is diverse and people living with any form of disability can be classified based on the degree, cause or the impacts of the impairment. Some impairment may be congenital, or an indicator of aging; the occurrence may be sudden or progressive throughout the years. While some disabilities may be visible, other impairment might not be visible at first glance.

Disabilities tend to be perceived differently in every society, either with acceptance or rejection. Acceptability can lead to advancement and improvement in the lives of the people suffering impairment and rejection can lead to stigmatization, retardation and lack of growth. According to Agbenyega, “[d]isability is also seen in Ghana as a result of witchcraft, sorcery, ‘juju’ and

magic” (Agbenyega, 2003:4). Such perceptions affect individuals suffering with disabilities and have the potential to affect their whole life.

One of the most prevalent impairments globally, (irrespective of the location) is hearing impairment (Stevens et al. 2011; Mathers et al, 2000). As the most frequent sensory deficit in human populations, it is estimated to affect approximately 299 million men, 239 million women and 16 million children (Stevens et al. 2011)⁷. Hearing impairment (HI) is caused by varied reasons (Amedufo, et al. 2006) and treatment can vary from the use of hearing aids if the impairment is mild, to surgical procedure such as cochlear implantation if the impairment is severe. HI as an invisible impairment becomes obvious only when the need arises as most people with hearing defect in Ghana do not wear hearing aids⁸.

Hearing impaired persons have suffered rejection and discrimination throughout history (see, Plann, 1997; Tun et al. 2016) and these usually lead to “abuse, neglect, and abandonment, and *deaf** children’s potential to contribute to the development of African nations is dismissed” (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003:21). In some societies, HI were considered less human (Bauman, 2004) and their language seen as not up to the standard of a human language and as such incapable of coding the experience of human life as spoken language does (Lang, 2003). While social agencies have over the years been a pillar for the development of people with impairments, local traditions are a mixture of both development and stigmatization. Miles (2004) mentions local traditions that barred the involvement of people with impairment or restricted their involvement in matters of legislation and social participation. Kiyaga & Moores were of the view that some people in Ethiopia “believe that *deaf** people are possessed by the devil and must be cured by witchcraft or purifying waters” (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003:22).

Kiyaga & Moores (2003:21) described the varied beliefs about HI in African societies; “acceptance and protection to rejection, including considerations of infanticide”. The common beliefs in most African nations have led to isolation

⁷ This study involved an analysis of hearing impairment prevalence in 29 countries.

⁸ Anecdotal observation of different groups of HI across Ghana.

and marginalisation of HI (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003). For instance, interviews conducted by the authors among HI in Adamorobe (Ghana) present some evidence of social constructions that stigmatise HI. Opare⁹ an HI in Adamorobe stated that “*if a person delivers a baby that is HI in Adamorobe, the baby is considered a witch*”.¹⁰ African traditional beliefs attributed many ailments including HI “as a manifestation of a mysterious fate” (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003:21) and some cultures hid HI children “from public view because of familial shame over having a handicapped child who may bring misfortune upon the family” (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003:21). To add to the above, education for HI in Ghana has not seen many improvements as compared to mainstream education (Akanlig-Pare, 2018).

HI form a minority group in Ghana and the census of 2010 recorded 0.4% of people with hearing impairment (c.f. 2010 census of Ghana). Records of the Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD) states that the association has “mobilised around 11,000 members (60:40 for men and women respectively) out of the estimated 110,625 deaf* people in Ghana” (GNAD)¹¹. Often, HI in Ghana, are “excluded, rejected, hidden or overprotected, and the typical life experience for most deaf* people is one of problematic communication with the wider society” (Kusters, 2012a:2770). Ghanaian societies label HI with several names and these include the following; *Dumb* (usually meaning stupid); *mumu* (without speech and hearing); *itsiw* (without hearing) *etc.* These labels are derogatory and not acceptable to HI in Ghana.

This chapter discusses the societal perception of HI in Ghana with focus on the Adamorobe community. We present an overview of societal perception of HI in Adamorobe (Ghana) based on narratives from both HI and NI in Adamorobe. We also considered materials from earlier research on HI in Adamorobe. The authors considered narratives gathered in the interviews and earlier research as foundational materials to this chapter on societal perception of HI in Adamorobe. The research is data driven and the results were discussed under the following

⁹ Name changed to anonymise person

¹⁰ Research narratives are italicized in the text.

¹¹ <http://gnadgh.org/about-us/> retrieved online on 4th November, 2018

headings; 1. societal perception of HI; 2. the marriage law that banned unions between two HI; 3. resistance strategies; and 4. The case for marriage rights for HI in Adamorobe. This study presents some of the challenges social constructions have imposed on HI in Adamorobe and presents alternatives that will bridge the societal gap between HI and NI.

Materials and methods

The study used qualitative research design for data collection and the approach that was used is narrative enquiry. Clandinin & Connelly (2000:477) were of the view that “[a]rguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives”. Thus, narrative inquiry captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and it considers the relationship between individual experience and cultural context. As has been noted, “ethical considerations permeate narrative inquiries from start to finish” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006 :483); thus appropriate ethical issues were dealt with before the research took place. Permission was obtained from the institutional review board of the university to which the first author belongs,¹² to conduct the study. In Adamorobe, all participants were duly informed of the nature of the study and they all consented to participate in this research. They agreed to have their videos taken, to be used for academic purposes. Through purposive sampling, 11 HI from Adamorobe comprising 5 males and 6 females were recruited in the study. This figure is representative of the HI community in Adamorobe which currently has about 40 HI (headcount done in 2016). The video data was coded with ELAN¹³ a multimodal language analysis tool and further tabulated in Excel according to the categories presented in this chapter.

¹² The research was approved by the University of Brighton, Humanities Ethics Board (UK). All participants consented to taking part in this research and were informed of the need to need to take video data for the analysis since signs cannot be recorded without videos. This interview was part of a larger research work aimed at documenting certain features of Adamorobe Sign Language. No part of the interview sessions on societal perception is presented in the larger language documentation work as we deem the need to anonymize all participants.

¹³ ELAN is a language annotation software designed by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Wittenburg, et al., 2006).

Three different focus group discussions lasting about an hour each were conducted with three different groups of HI in Adamorobe. The focus group discussions were moderated by one of the investigators who is also fluent in Adamorobe Sign Language. The first group (N=6) of HI interviewed were people who have been affected by the *marriage law*, the second group (N=3) were HI who were formerly in relationships with hearing members of the community. The final group (N=2) was made up of educated HI in Adamorobe. Each respondent was sampled based on earlier contacts with HI in the community and the stories that were shared with the researchers.

The participants were purposively selected from among the HI to get a unified representation of HI according to the categories investigated. In addition to the HI participants, 5 hearing members of the community were individually interviewed with a semi-structured interview guide. These 5 were all related to a hearing-impaired person in Adamorobe and they were part of the initial contacts that were made in Adamorobe. These interviews were to identify if the narratives generated from the HI are in line with other narratives being circulated in Adamorobe by the majority (in this case the hearing people or the NI). There were no focus group discussions. The interview guides were not based on a specific theory.

The main motivation for three different focus group discussions was to ascertain the validity of the results derived from each group of participants. Each HI had a different story and the analysis of the data also considered the consistency of the general issues from one discussion to the other. Therefore, the narratives presented in this study are views of the participants. The results from this study cannot be generalized to every rural location in Ghana since societies and community in Ghana do not share the same cultural context. This chapter reflects temporal unfolding of HI in Adamorobe and topics “within the inquiry, the personal and social aspects of inquirer’s and participants’ lives, and the places in the inquiry”. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006:485).

2.1 Study setting- Adamorobe

Adamorobe is located in the Eastern Region of Ghana and has a history of genetic hearing impairment (Nyst, 2007; Kusters, 2012a, Kusters, 2012b; Edward, 2018) and the co-existence of both HI and NI (Frishberg, 1987; Okyere & Addo, 1994;

Nyst, 2007). Adamorobe's HI are unique as compared to most HI in Ghana; they have their own language which is also shared by NI friends and family. However, stigmatization and restrictive laws have reduced the number of HI in Adamorobe (Kusters, 2012a; Edward, 2018). The once well-known community of HI is reduced and the result of local laws (marriage law) has resulted in many childless marriages and left many HI males unmarried (Kusters, 2012a).

The “burden” of HI in Adamorobe is based on the label “deaf* village” (Kusters, 2012a:2770) that led to many researchers visiting the village from the 1970s till date. This label is “misleading, restricting and derogatory” (Kusters 2012a:2770) and has made some HI and NI relocate to different communities in Ghana for fear of reproducing other HI babies and continuing the cycle of poverty and discrimination (Edward, 2018). Although the majority of the inhabitants in Adamorobe are hearing and HI form less than 2% of the population (Edward, 2015a). Some outsiders also perceive the community as a “dirty”, “deaf* village”, “place of contagion, curses and witchcraft” (Kusters, 2012:2770). These social labels restrict the movement of HI from Adamorobe to other communities.

In the early 70's a research was conducted in Adamorobe to find out the cause of recessive hearing impairment and the results of the research was that a genetic mutation results in the reproduction of babies with HI (Nyst, 2007). The research team also counselled against marriages between HI as a remedial step to halting the HI “baby boom” (Kusters, 2012a) that brought the community into national limelight. The genetic counselling led to the passing of the Marriage Law (Nyst, 2007; Kusters, 2012a) that prohibited marital unions between two HI. The genetic counselling that led to the promulgation of the marriage law was given in the 1970s (Nyst, 2007) to ensure a reduction in the number of HI children born in Adamorobe. Kusters (2012a) wrote that a gong beater was sent to proclaim the news to the community. This news was welcomed with varied responses. The HI community saw it as a restriction to their right to marry and some NI saw it as a gradual step to end the genetic hearing impairment that has engulfed the community for several centuries (Nyst, 2007; Okyere & Addo, 1994). Afua¹⁴, a

¹⁴ Name changed to anonymise the person.

hearing relative of three of the HI in Adamorobe, claims that some people in Adamorobe do not like the presence of the HI.

The ban on HI marriages is frowned upon by the HI community in Adamorobe and *free marriage* is one means of resisting against the ban. The free marriage opposes the traditional Akan notion of marriage. The ideologies behind the free marriage unions are listed in Kusters (2012a: 2774). Free marriages “are sexual relationships between people who eschew the fulfilment of the traditional customs to marry, especially after a divorce or with their second and third wife in a polygamous union, for the following possible reasons: (1) the disapproval of the marriage by one of the partners’ lineages, for example because the Akan marriage rules are broken; (2) not having enough financial resources to pay the *tiri nsa* (an agreement concluded with money and gifts from the man to the woman and her family), (3) wanting a trial relationship with their partner before marrying, (4) not intending to be in a long-lasting union” (Kusters, 2012a: 2774).

Currently, the expansion of the community and the immigration of outsiders into Adamorobe have increased the population and the vibrant Adamorobe Sign Language (AdaSL) used between HI and NI is gradually becoming moribund (Edward, 2015b, Nyst, 2007). The social lives of HI in Adamorobe is woven in religious activities. The religious nature of the HI is identified through their weekly church meetings in the Lutheran church which is specifically for HI in Adamorobe (Nyst, 2007; Kusters, 2014) with services held in Ghanaian Sign Language (GSL) and incorporating few AdaSL signs (Edward, 2015b).

Education for HI in Ghana is very recent and began in the 1950s after the establishment of the first HI school in Ghana by the American missionary Andrew Foster (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003). Therefore, most adult HI in Adamorobe are not educated, although it is believed that some of the elderly HI in Adamorobe benefited from Andrew Foster’s classes in sign language (Nyst, 2007). The younger generation of HI in Adamorobe are mostly educated to Junior High School, Senior High School or Vocational Schools and some have stopped school as a result of teenage pregnancy (Edward, 2015a; 2015b; 2018). The HI adults have acquired traces of GSL which is used in communicating between themselves as a secret language (Kusters, 2012a; Edward, 2015b) to avoid intrusion from the

signing NI. Other younger HI from Adamorobe have acquired transferable vocational skills through their education and training.

Data Collection

The data for this research was collected by one of the authors and assisted by one hearing AdaSL signer who sometimes mediated between the researcher and HIs as an interpreter. The data collection was done through focus group discussion with selected HI and interviews with selected NIs. The focus group discussions used semi-structured interview guides on the biographic information of participants, marriage status, employment etc. The openness of the interview guides allowed for follow-up questions. All the interviews were conducted in Adamorobe.

Appendix 1. is a sample of the interview guide¹⁵ that was used to collect the biographical information from participants. Other narratives taken from the HI were done using semi structured interviews and the issues arising were developed based on the responses from the HI. From the interviews, all eleven HI were found to have been born with the impairment and all of them had HI in either their nuclear or extended families. Table 1. represents the general demographics of HI who took part in the study;

No.	Age	Gen der	Education level	Occupation	Marital status	Years of living with HI	Number of children
1.	55	M	Null	Farmer	Married	55	0
2.	72	M	Null	Farmer	Not married	72	0
3.	49	M	Null	Farmer	Not married	49	0
4.	45	M	Null	Farmer	Married	45	0
5.	60	M	Null	Herbalist/Farmer	Married	60	2

¹⁵ These were the general questions that were asked all HI. The three groups had specific questions which are not on this sample.

6.	55	F	Null	Farmer	Married	55	1
7.	53	F	Null	Farmer	Married	53	1
8.	69	F	Null	Farmer/stone quarry work	Not married	69	1
9.	55	F	Null	Farmer	Married	55	2
10.	24	F	Vocational training	Hair stylist	Not married	24	1
11	25	F	Senior High School	Trader	Married	25	1

Table 1. Demographics of 11 HI

3. Results

The focus group discussion and individual interviews were analysed and presented under the following themes; societal perception of HI, the marriage prohibition and resistance strategies by HI.

3.1 Societal Perception of HI in Adamorobe

All the 11 HI who were involved in this study complained of being discriminated against once or several times. Stigmatization and discrimination of HI in Adamorobe have robbed most of the HI their privileges including inheritance and right to marry. Two complained of being cheated on by hearing family members because of their impairment. One adult HI lamented that when HI babies are born, they are considered witches as a result the younger HI would prefer to live elsewhere other than Adamorobe. However, most of the older HI who were interviewed prefer to be in Adamorobe because they “*feel at home here*”. Two HI women who took part in the study have completed Senior High School and Vocational School in the nearby School for the Deaf* in Mampong. In spite of their skills and training, they are unable to apply their skills to work in the capacity of their training but are engaged in farming, stone quarrying, and other menial jobs. All the HI participants reported the effect of this societal exclusion on their self-esteem.

The hearing people who were contacted in this research described HI as hardworking, gossipy, and sometimes quarrelsome. The hardworking nature of the adult HI in Adamorobe is not unknown to Adamorobeans. Those who farm are seen early in the morning heading to their farms. However, the NI who do not understand AdaSL perceive the HI as gossips who “*talk about other people*”. According to one NI, the HI in Adamorobe are mostly the first people to “*hear news in town even if they go to the farm*”. They are perceived as chatterboxes who talk about everything and have secret sign names for almost every prominent person in Adamorobe. Although the NI who expressed their thoughts about HI had both positive and negative views about them, they gladly accepted them, and indicated their hope that outsiders would accept HI and stop referring to Adamorobe as “*Mumu kurow*” (HI village).

The societal view that HIs are quarrelsome is shared by both HI and NI in Adamorobe. Interactions with several HI (not the formal interviews) indicate that most HI in Adamorobe have petty quarrels with each other. During the data collection in Adamorobe, some of the HI who had quarrelled with other HI had “blacklisted” them and did not want the researcher to include them in the research. They perceived those people as wicked and troublesome. When the researcher decided to visit the HI church, two different groups of HI advised against the idea since they had recently had a brawl at the church and did not want the researcher to be involved. A hearing signer (NI) indicated that the HI Pastor who is not an Adamorobeans was contemplating leaving the church because he was insulted almost every Sunday.

Aside the diverse societal perception about HI in Adamorobe, one prominent view held among both HI and NI persons is wrong perceptions (social labels) about HI including *dumb* (stupid) and ignorant. These wrong perceptions translated even into marriages and sexual relations. Marriages or sexual relations between HI and NI usually did not last and one problem observed was with respect to the labels associated with the HI. For example, the story of Asabea¹⁶ a hearing-impaired person who had a daughter with one teacher of the primary school in Adamorobe complained bitterly of how the teacher took away her daughter without her consent and for over thirty years, had not heard from them. When the researchers

¹⁶ Name changed for anonymity.

inquired from other older people in Adamorobe, the reply given was that “*HI were looked down upon during that time and the teacher might have taken the daughter away to avoid her being ridiculed as the daughter of an HP*”. Asabea indicated that she had not recovered from the shock of having her daughter taken away from her. Among the HI participants, four of the women each had a child for NI men but only one was living together with the NI man at the time of the research. From the interviews it was observed that some NI engaged in sexual relations with HI but were not married to them. The NI engaged in sexual relations with the HI are unwilling to marry them because of the societal perception of HI in Adamorobe.

The impact of societal labelling of HI in Adamorobe has resulted in all the three dimensions of labeling stated by Perusin (1994:84 cited from Agbenyega, 2003).

- Patterns of social interaction change when labels are assigned to the individual- Although there seems to be a sense of acceptance of HI in Adamorobe (as confirmed by most of the NI), the patterns of interactions with most HI is based on the assumption that they cannot hear and therefore unpleasant things may be said about them;
- Labeling engenders marginalisation of the affected persons and compels them to keep company with others in a similar subculture- Almost all 11 HI in confirmed that they prefer the company of other HI to being with NI.
- The individual who is labeled ‘disabled’ and so classified, gradually conforms to the characteristics of the label, which results in a self-fulfilling prophecy- From the interviews, one factor that emerged from the uneducated HI who were part of the study are the notions “*I can’t do*” or “*I am not able to do*”. For example, some of the narratives recorded from the HI who were interviewed include statements from one unmarried man who stated that *I cannot marry because of my impairment*. Another young lady who lamented her futile search for a job and rejection from employers stated that *I am not able to work with hearing people at the same place because of my impairment*.

3.2 Marriage Ban in Adamorobe

The effect of the ban on HI marriages is still felt in Adamorobe. The marriage ban has produced multiple effects including denial to have marital partners, denial to have children, stigmatization, divorces, unstable relationships, lack of economic support and loneliness.

From the interviews conducted, it was noted that 2 of the HI men had never married, 2 HI couples were childless, and 3 HI women had been separated from their partners. They each attributed their respective situations to the ban on marriage which restricted HI from being married to each other and ultimately frowning upon the idea of HI having children with the same impairment in Adamorobe. Out of the 11 HI, 2 complained of the lack of support and loneliness as a result of not having partners. One HI man in Adamorobe in his late seventies complained about the “*difficulty in working in the farm alone*” because he had no wife. The NI women in Adamorobe refused him because of the belief that HI men were the carriers of the gene that causes hearing impairment. One NI was of the view that there was no marriage between most of the HI and NI who have children together because no “*head drink*” or “*bride price*” was paid. Referring to the marriage law, Kwesi¹⁷ (NI in Adamorobe) was of the view that “*the law was to prevent HI males from getting married to either NI or HP*”. The result of the ban on marriage was felt mostly by the men. According to Kwesi “*most HI men do not have children and have not been married before*”. He also mentioned that “*related hearing couples in Adamorobe risk having an HI child*”.

Thus, the idea of marriage is an illusion for HI since the fundamental rites of the Akan marriages are not performed. In the Akan culture, the fundamental of the family begins from the marriage union, which ultimately becomes the source of *legitimate* children. Having children outside marriage is unacceptable in the traditional Akan culture and children born outside marital unions are considered illegitimate in many Akan societies. There are some Akan communities in Ghana that force men to marry their dead partners by performing the marriage rites (like paying the bride price and providing all marital items) before the burial. The Akan understanding of marriage is defined as “an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual are acknowledged” (Annin & Abrefa 2014: 92, cited from Okyere-Manu 2015: 47). Therefore,

¹⁷ Pseudonym

marriage is the only recognised institution for sexual intimacy in the Akan culture. The ban on marriage in Adamorobe denies HI the pleasure to have sex and children born outside the institution of marriage are called illegitimate children until the parents marry. These reasons indicate the importance of marriage to the HI in Adamorobe and how the marriage ban affects them.

Obaa¹⁸ an HI in her sixties has one hearing daughter from a past relationship with an NI man. Their union did not survive, like most HI-NI unions in Adamorobe. Although Obaa is excited that she has a hearing daughter and grandchildren, she lamented the pressures of raising her daughter alone after the breakup with her partner was very difficult. Obaa's situation is not uncommon; some NI men abandon the HI women after they get pregnant and leave the responsibility of taking care of them to the HI women. According to the interviewees, most marital unions among HI and NI usually ended in divorce. The NI men would refuse to take responsibility for their children, leaving the HI mothers to raise the children on their own since. Therefore, the marriage ban is perceived as a conspiracy to wipe out the history of Adamorobe by wiping out HI from the community.

o **Resistance: a survival strategy**

Resistance to societal norms that hinder the right of individuals to perform certain functions have brought about changes in many societies. As outlined above, societal perception and societal laws have affected HI in Adamorobe for several years since the introduction of the marriage ban in the early 1970s. The effects of the stigmatization and the marriage ban on the livelihoods of HI in Adamorobe has made HI in Adamorobe resist this law using the strategies outlined below;

3.3.1 Free marriages

In free marriages, all the requirements of the Akan marriage rights are eschewed and couples engaging in such marriages are not recognised as married by family members. Through free marriages, HI in Adamorobe demonstrate their resistance to social laws that have prevented them from marrying by ignoring the Akan culture of marriage which requires a head drink and bride price to be paid. 6 out

¹⁸ Name changed for anonymity.

of the 7 HI who stated they were married were engaged in free marriages. One HI man who is with another HI woman in a free marriage stated that he loved an NI woman but when he made his intentions known to her, “*the lady refused because I can’t hear and communicate through signs. She (pointing to an HI woman in the room) accepted me and we are now together*”.

Kwaku and Akosua,¹⁹ respondents in the interview are engaged in free marriage and the age difference between them is worth noting. Kwaku is about 15 years younger than Akosua. In free marriages in Adamorobe, most of the women are older women with a child or two, and the men are relatively younger men who might not have been married before. Usually, the older women in free marriages would have been in relationships with other men (either HI or NI) in the past. All the women in this study who are married to younger men have had children (either HI or NI) from previous relationships. Most of these relationships ended because the male partners left the HI women for NI women or left Adamorobe without a trace. Free marriages are therefore a form of resistance against societal norms that bars two HI from getting married.

3.3.2 Abortions

One other resistance strategy employed by some HI in Adamorobe is abortion. HI couples who do not want to be subjected to societal exclusion and ridicule resort to abortions. Although societal perception of HI in Adamorobe is generally positive, some of the HI feel excluded when it comes to sharing family properties and participating in other important issues. Therefore, they are often unwilling to subject an HI child to the same predicament.

From all indications, when an unmarried HI is impregnated by another HI from Adamorobe, they resort to abortions. Informal narratives with NI suggest that abortions are prevalent among HI women in Adamorobe. However, when the father of the child is NI or another HI from a different community, there is no reason to abort. This could be the reason for many teenage pregnancy cases among the HI community in Adamorobe. One HI teenager who was impregnated by another HI teenager was excited that her baby’s father does not come from

¹⁹ Names changed to anonymise the couple.

Adamorobe so there is a possibility that the baby will be hearing, and she will not face stigmatization from the family. Though the narratives and other earlier research (Kusters, 2012a; Bleek, 1981) mentioned its occurrence, it appears abortions are done secretly and no information about it is likely to be shared with others.

- **Discussion**

In Adamorobe, societal restrictions have caused disability to become a hindrance to desire to be married. From the interviews with the NI, it was identified that it is almost impossible for two HI in Adamorobe to be properly married because of societal restrictions and disagreement from families. Informal conversations with NI Adamorobeans reveal that most of them do not appreciate marital unions among HI's and the reason is that HI unions bring forth only HI children.

1. The Case for Marriage right

Two HI couple among the participants have two HI children, and although this might support the assertion that the gene that causes hearing impairment is carried by HI men (Kusters, 2012a; Nyst, 2007) it would be speculation, in the absence of scientific testing, to hold this as proof of such a connection. This is particularly important, as there were some examples of two NI couples having HI children. Nancy²⁰ an HI, for example, is the only person in her father's house who has the impairment. However, further investigations revealed that her father is related to some of the HI in Adamorobe. Therefore, it is possible that the gene that causes hearing impairment may not only be found in the HI men, but also in some of the NI who are related to the HI. The societal step to ban marriages between HI in Adamorobe to reduce the rate of having hearing impaired children is therefore not justified, it is doubtful that the step will reduce the rate of having HI children in Adamorobe.

Furthermore, in Adamorobe, one thing that is common among all HI is poverty. Even the younger HI who have been educated still complain of lack of jobs and the stigmatization they face when they try to compete with other NI for the same

²⁰ Name changed to anonymise person

jobs. Marriage therefore becomes a means to share resources among HI couples in Adamorobe. Through the focus group discussions, we identified that even some educated HI in Adamorobe are engaged in subsistence farming, stone quarrying and some others are unemployed. Most of the younger HI females had a child or two with other NI men who have either abandoned them or are cohabiting with them. Marriage therefore becomes a means of financial support for HI as resources are shared among couples.

To add to the above, marriage among HI in Adamorobe is a means to overcome the pressure of loneliness. Opare, one of the oldest HI men in Adamorobe complained of loneliness and rejection. He is in his early seventies and has never been married. At the time of the interview, he was receiving medical attention which was being sponsored by a religious group. He still needed to farm to provide his needs.

Hearing impairment should not be a hindrance to marital rights. HI in other places in urban Ghana (Accra and its environs) are not denied the opportunity to be in marital relationships (Edward, 2018). It is recommended that HI in Adamorobe should be given the choice to marry either HI or NI because the section one of the Persons with Disability Act (PWD 715) passed in 2006 gives PWDs the right to live with their families and frowns on subjecting PWDs to differential treatment, exploitation and discrimination (Asante & Sasu, 2015). Furthermore, the 1992 Ghanaian constitution guarantees the fundamental human rights of every individual including the freedom of association and the provision of non-discriminatory rights. The PWD 715 and the 1992 constitution of Ghana mandates that people be guaranteed to have full enjoyment of rights without discrimination. Marriage is a right to be enjoyed by all persons whether HI or NI.

- **Conclusion**

The history of Adamorobe is characterized by the presence of HI from time immemorial. Okyere & Addo (1994) were of the view that the co-existence of HI and NI in Adamorobe could date as far as the 18th century, precisely 1733. Nyst (2007) and Kusters (2012a) present some of the myths surrounding the presence of HI in Adamorobe. From mystical stories of deaf warriors to stories of punishment from the gods, HI have long been part of almost every tale told about

Adamorobe. Frishberg (1987) reports of a large population of hearing signers in Adamorobe and the fact that both HI and NI could communicate in AdaSL. Over the years, the influx of migrants to Adamorobe has reduced this trend.

The paper sheds light on societal perception of HI in Adamorobe and discusses the marriage ban that prevented marital unions among HI. From the data gathered, there is a mixed perception towards HI in Adamorobe. Families with one or more incidence of HI accept and appreciate the presence of HI but would prefer not to have more HI. On the other hand, others have negative perceptions of HI and would not want to be involved in their lives. All 11 consultants shared their sentiments of rejection and stigmatization by either family or members of the community.

Throughout this paper the authors have demonstrated that although the societal perception of HI in Adamorobe is perceived by family members of HI as positive, there is a greater margin between HI and NI based on societal laws and labels. Through narrative inquiry, the experience of HI in Adamorobe was captured by considering individual experiences and societal restrictions that have affected the livelihoods of HI in Adamorobe. The findings suggest that HI in Adamorobe suffer from discrimination and stigmatization in relation to marital partners. Marital disruptions in Ghana seem to be influenced by some social factors including the family system (Takyi, 2001). However, the marriage ban denies HIs in Adamorobe the joy of marriage and the associated benefits of shared financial responsibilities among HI couples. Ultimately, the HI men who could not marry nor have children because of the marriage ban will be denied future remittances from children.

The United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) states that “[o]ne of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities” (UNESCO: 2003:3) and these include hearing impaired persons in Adamorobe. Societies contribute to the wellbeing and growth of its people. In Adamorobe, financial intervention is always mentioned by the residents as a step to fix their community and help the poor and vulnerable. Societal discrimination and stigmatization of His only make matters worse. Governmental agencies and

opinion leaders are needed to bring changes to societies that will ensure equal opportunities for all.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire 1a- Hearing Impaired Persons

Research Topic: SOCIETAL PERCEPTION OF HEARING IMPAIRMENT IN GHANA: A REPORT ON ADAMOROBE

1. Demographics
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender
 - c. Occupation
 - d. Marital status

2. Were you born with hearing impairment?
If not, when did you become impaired?

3. Do you have other family members who are hearing impaired?
If Yes, who are they?

4. Have you ever faced discrimination because you are hearing impaired?
If yes answer question 5 and 7

5. Who discriminated against you?

6. Where were you discriminated against?

7. Do you ever feel alone?

8. Are you happy the way other hearing people in Adamorobe treat you?

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