

# 25 years Post ADA: A Social Worker's Experience and Reflections about Environmental Barriers

Augustina Naami

**Abstract:** 25 years post ADA, environment barriers persist in the United States, impacting greatly on the effective socio-economic and political participation of Americans with disabilities in mainstream society. This narrative reflects a social worker's experience of environmental challenges in both rural and urban America and suggestions for social work practice and policy.

**Keywords:** Ghana, persons with disability, accessibility, environment barriers, ADA.

One of the happiest days in my life was the day I received news about a Ford Foundation scholarship to pursue my master's degree in one of American's best Universities. I never dreamt of studying in the United States given that my family was poor and couldn't afford to pay for my education abroad. Even completing my undergraduate education in Ghana was financially problematic. But, more challenging was the social and environmental barriers including attitudinal, architectural, and transportation. For example, while I was in high school, I usually woke up early in the morning before everyone else to use the bathroom, which is an open building without showers and had 2 huge steps in the front. I did this because when the floor was wet it became slippery and increasingly difficult to manage on my crutches. And at college, I never studied in the library due to the flight of stairs I must maneuver to get in. I would rather check out books and study in my dormitory room; a practice I became used to and still do. The library wasn't the only inaccessible building on campus. The dormitories, classrooms, cafeterias, faculty offices, administration buildings and several others buildings weren't usable for persons with disabilities.

Access barriers are a huge issue in Ghana but there is a lack of literature about how persons with disabilities experience these barriers. The few that exist give general information about the situation. Naami (2010; 2012; 2014) and Tijm et al (2011) depict the daily struggles persons with disabilities in Ghana encounter due to inaccessible buildings, lack of sidewalks, ramps, elevators, and curb cuts. These studies indicate how participants

lamented the difficulty in accessing public buildings like schools, churches, government offices, theaters, libraries, and even toilets. Some of them disclosed that they occasionally parked their wheelchairs and tricycles outside these buildings and crawled inside. Some organizations are attempting to fix ramps to make their buildings more accessible, which is laudable. But from personal experience these ramps are either too narrow or too steep. I usually used the stairs on my crutches instead of the ramps because they are practically inaccessible. Naami (2010; 2012; 2014) also noted that there is no single accessible public transportation system in Ghana despite the importance of transportation. In her studies, the participants described their tussles to board buses, "trotros," (mini-vans) trains and ferries, amidst other intolerant passengers. Participants also described how they had to cope with man-made barriers created by placing passengers' baggage in the aisles of vehicles. It is sometimes almost impossible to use bathrooms/toilets, due to the difficulty in negotiating the crowded aisles.

Coming to the United States for further education was therefore a huge relief for me because I knew I would get good education in a more accessible environment. In this reflection, I will highlight and discuss the physical and transportation barriers I experience in the United States. I conclude with implications for social work practice and policy.

## Life in Chicago and Salt Lake City

I was exhilarated about my new adventure to the United States, but I also felt a bit nervous as I had never traveled outside of Ghana and didn't

have any family in the United States. I have a very large and closely knit family and I knew I was going to miss them, but no turning back, my mind was set. I was convinced about my decision to study abroad.

The great day, the day of departure, which I was anxiously waiting for finally arrived (September 19th, 2002). It was a very long trip (about 13 hours of travel and 6 hours in transit in Britain), traveling from Ghana to the United States. I breathed a sigh of relief as the airplane landed at O'Hare International airport because I was very tired. All I wanted at that time was to get some rest. It was a Friday evening around 6:00 pm on the 20th September and autumn cold air greeted me outside of the airport, but I was warmly dressed because I was informed about the weather conditions. An American visiting professor I met while in Ghana, who is also an alumnus of the educational institution I was going to, was at the airport to meet me. Brenda had traveled several hours from Pinckney in Michigan. It was so good to see a known face at the airport and Brenda stayed a couple of days to show me around Chicago and to introduce me to her friends.

Brenda had informed the school administration about my arrival time so the director of admissions waited with the keys to my apartment which she had picked from the Office of Student Housing. We exchanged greetings then Brenda and I headed towards my apartment building which was just a block away from the school. At this time, we were both eager to get to my apartment because we were tired. But apparently, I had a little more work to do to access my apartment. As Brenda opened the two heavy doors to the apartment building, we thought that was it but no, there was one more barrier, six huge marble steps to get to the first floor (no elevator) where my studio apartment was located. We were both disappointed about the kind of apartment allocated to me because I remember I unequivocally explained to the Office of Student Housing the kind of accommodation I wanted. While in Ghana, I never envisioned access barriers in the United

States. Thus, to have this experience on my first day of arrival, and as tired as I was, is inexplicable. Even then, I didn't foresee the impact these barriers could have on me as I had managed several barriers in Ghana. I felt it wasn't going to be a big issue until later, when I had to bring grocery up the steps, carry my back pack and other things on my crutches.

Brenda talked to the dean of students of my school. She was also disappointed about the situation. She then spoke with the Office of Student Housing and they showed us a couple of accessible apartments. None of them was closer to the school and they were all shared apartments but I wanted a single-room apartment closer to the school. I really wanted to be alone so I can have a little privacy. The Office of Disability Services and the Office of Student Housing worked together with me to modify my apartment to make it more accessible. It was so heart-warming to see how quickly everyone involved responded to the situation. The office of student housing gave me an electronic device with which I could open the doors. The office also modified the inside of the apartment: lowered cabinets, switches and towel hangers. These changes were very helpful. Regardless of the efforts to make my apartment more accessible, the 6 steps could not be taken away. I had to manage them on a daily basis: going to and from classes, doing grocery and taking them into my apartment on my crutches as my scooter cannot get over the steps. Also, the laundry and the garbage bins were located in the basement (no elevator) of the building whose entrance was at the other end, about 30 meters away from my apartment. Doing laundry and disposing off garbage became a daunting task for me as I had to carry the garbage and laundry bag while walking on crutches. All in all, it was such a great joy when I received my master's degree and I am so grateful to that university and my school for all their support in diverse ways to make my education a success.

My experience with housing was different in the other university in Salt Lake City where I did my doctoral studies. I arrived a week before the start of school, and with the help of the head of

the doctoral program, I searched for housing and rented an apartment that met my needs. The building as well as my apartment was Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant. I brought my scooter in and out as well as got around my apartment and did laundry without any difficulty, although the laundry was on the 14th floor. It was so heart-warming to be able to get around the apartment building with no difficulties.

It is important to stress that the campuses of both universities were accessible as well as the cities, at least, those places I am familiar with. There were thorough sidewalks and curb cuts, ramps and elevators everywhere I went. While in Chicago, I mostly used my scooter to get around: to attend classes, do my grocery and run other errands, attend public gathering on campus and in the neighborhood. To travel further from campus, I rode paratransit buses. I used the fixed route buses and trains as well, but not as much as I did in Salt Lake City. In Salt Lake City, I mostly used the fixed route buses and trains to run almost all errands. This is because it took me over two months to obtain eligibility for the paratransit service in Salt Lake City, by which time I had already learned to ride the fixed route buses and trains and I enjoyed using these means of transport. It was so easy to get around. In these two cities, apart from the 6 steps to get to my apartment in Chicago, I never had problems getting around. I went anywhere I wanted to go at any time. Nothing hindered my movement and social participation. I really felt like I was a part of the communities where I lived as I could easily get around at my own pace and time, as well as participated in activities I chose to.

### **Life in Cedar Falls**

My experience with accessibility is much different in Cedar Falls, Iowa (which is more rural) where I currently live, compared to Salt Lake City and Chicago. I encounter several access barriers on a daily basis, making it much more difficult to get around. When I first moved here in 2011 to begin my career as a university professor, I inspected several

apartment buildings. But they were not accessible. They all had a couple of steps in the front. And of course, the inside wasn't accessible either. For example, light switches were high up, there were bathtubs instead of walk-in showers, and the closets were not wheelchair accessible. But all the apartment managers were willing to work with me to make the apartment accessible for me after explaining my condition to them, which was good news. I chose the current apartment because it's more spacious. I can easily get around everywhere in my apartment with my wheelchair except for my closet. The manager fulfilled his promise by fixing a ramp to my apartment and the laundry room, which is next door to my apartment. At that time, I didn't realize that the laundry room had two doors one of which (outer door which is also the security door) was very heavy and opens to the outside and is always locked. To get in, I first should put my laundry bag somewhere on the ramp, unlock the door, then pull it out, hold onto it, find my laundry bag, put it on my lap and then wheel my chair in while still holding onto the door. This made it practically impossible to do laundry. Again, I explained to the apartment manager how difficult it is to do laundry due to the weight of the security door. He worked with his management team to reduce the door weight drastically. I no longer dread doing laundry. The manager and I also had a conversation about the light switches, bathroom hangers, and the blinds and handles and the need to lower them. How great it feels to have them all now within my reach.

Also, unlike Salt Lake City and Chicago where it was easy for me to get around, I cannot say the same about Cedar Falls. Sidewalks are virtually non-existent as well as curb cuts and ramps. There are several stores, restaurants, and other public places around where I live that I could go to with my scooter. But the unavailable sidewalks make it difficult for me to run errands and do other things with my scooter. Because doing so means using the main streets which is dangerous. Although, I know my safety is compromised using the main streets, sometimes I am compelled to do so because I have no choice. I will explain why this is the

case when I talk about my experience with the paratransit service. Things get even worse when it snows as these streets are usually not cleared. Thus, in Cedar Falls, I am limited in the things I can do using my scooter and saving time such as going to a nearby grocery store and picking a few food items like milk, bread, and fruits, which usually run out quickly. This sometimes makes me feel helpless.

In addition, the transportation system's environment (bus stops) is not accessible. Most of the bus stops are unpaved; neither do they have curb-cuts or ramps to enable wheelchair and scooter users to get on the stops and in-and-out of the buses. When I first arrived at Cedar Falls, a colleague gave me the bus schedules and application form for the paratransit and other resources. It takes about 30 days to complete the paratransit application process. In the meantime, one morning, a few days after my arrival, I decided to use the public transit bus to familiarize myself with the city, thinking that it was going to be as easy as in the other cities. I was very excited about my adventure when I set off to the bus stop, which is about half of a block away from my apartment building. To my surprise, this bus stop, as many other stops I saw later, was neither paved nor has a curb-cut. I returned to the apartment very disappointed. At that moment, it dawned on me that part of my freedom was taken away. I spent the rest of the day talking to friends about the issue and also thinking about how life was going to be like for me in Cedar Falls, given that I cannot easily ride my scooter around as well as use the public transit bus.

In fact, life has never been the same since the paratransit service is my only choice of getting around the city. The paratransit service in this area leaves much to be desired. Often, I spend so much time in transit, mostly doing nothing but waiting for the bus. Therefore, I must always make provisions for extra waiting time whenever I use the paratransit service. And, I ride it practically on a daily basis. Also, the service the

Metropolitan Transit Authority of the Black Hawk County paratransit provides normally ends by 6:00 pm Monday through Saturday. No service is provided on Sundays. Thus, those of us who depend on the paratransit service must find alternative means of transport after hours and on Sundays. But, it is not as easy as it may sound. Iowans are very friendly and Cedar Falls is a very quiet and nice neighborhood. Most times, people offer me ride but what will I do with my scooter? I remember one day at work there was an interesting program I wished I could have attended, but it involved after hour services. My colleague offered to give me a ride home. But how would I carry my books and other things to work the next day if I leave behind my scooter? From this narration, you can see how the gap in paratransit service and architectural barriers dramatically impact the socio-economic participation of persons with disabilities in this area.

### **Collective Environmental Challenges of Americans with Disabilities**

It can be deduced from my narrative account that environmental barriers (transportation and architectural) persist in both rural and urban areas of the United States but they seem to be more prevalent in rural areas. It is very sad that 25 years post-ADA and other complementary laws Americans with disabilities continue to encounter several environmental (physical and transportation) and many other barriers (including, information and technology, social, psychological and institutional). My discussion focuses on environmental barriers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990 and requires all states to make their programs and services, including public transportation and the entire transportation system's environment (e.g., stops and stations), accessible for persons with disabilities. Paratransit and other transportation services are required for those who are unable to use the fixed route transit buses and trains due to their disabilities. The law also mandates that building facilities be accessible and usable to persons with disabilities. Public places (e.g., including libraries, theaters, restaurants, laundry

facilities, lecture halls, and hospitals), whether operated by the government or private entities, should be accessible and usable as well.

Transportation plays a vital role in everyone's life as people need to get to their jobs, schools, and several other places. The same is the case for persons with disabilities. The majority of persons with disabilities travel mainly by public transit system, e.g., bus, train, and paratransit (Wu, Gan, Cevallos, & Shen, 2011). However, there seem to be inadequate accessible public transit services, which affect the lives of persons with disabilities in various ways. Studies show that the lack of accessible transportation is the greatest factor affecting the employment (Aldred & Woodcock, 2008; Belgrave & Walker, 1991; Lubin, 2012; Naami, 2010), education, health care, and overall social inclusion of persons with disabilities (Aldred & Woodcock, 2008; Naami, 2010). For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in 2011 was 15.0%, almost the same as the previous year's rate (15.7%), compared to 8.7% for those without disabilities, which was an improvement over the previous year's rate of 9.6% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Not only did the Bureau find higher unemployment rates among persons with disabilities but, also, lower employment rates for all groups of persons with disabilities.

The availability of accessible transportation (e.g. buses and trains) does not necessarily mean accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Research shows that several factors affect access for persons with disabilities to transportation including: (1) the presence of functioning transportation equipment (e.g., ramps and safety facilities); (2) information (the ability to access transportation information and to read and understand schedules); (3) economic (e.g., cost of service); (4) reliability of services; and (5) the environment, how easy it is to navigate the pedestrian environment safely. Examples are the availability and condition of sidewalks

(broken sidewalks or sidewalks overgrown with weeds), curb cuts, ramps/street edges, intersections, street crossing and lighting (Church & Marston, 2003; Lubin, 2012; Erin, 2011; Wu, Gan, Cevallos & Shen, 2011). Also, there is evidence of the existence of inaccessible dressing rooms, shelves and cash registers in stores, restrooms and elevators (Brook, 2007; Lubin, 2012). These barriers hinder Americans with disabilities from effective participation in mainstream society (Aldred & Woodcock, 2008; Crowe, Picchiarini & Poffenroth, 2004; McClain, 2000; Naami, 2010).

### **Conclusion and Implication for Social Work Practice and Policy**

I have discussed my personal experience with accessibility issues in both rural and urban areas of the United States. I have also painted the picture of the collective experience of Americans with disabilities regarding accessibility. One of our profession's core values is to work with oppressed individuals and groups to challenge the social injustices they experience daily and I know that social workers have been working in diverse ways to improve the lives of vulnerable populations including persons with disabilities. However, I also believe we still need to do a lot more because Americans with disabilities continue to encounter a myriad of accessibility challenges (including environmental, information and technology, social, psychological and institutional) which negatively impact on their effective participation and social inclusion as well as their development. The human rights of persons with disabilities are practically denied as they cannot freely engage their communities as desired. It is unacceptable for Americans with disabilities to continue to experience accessibility barriers, discrimination, unemployment, and poverty 25 years post ADA. Social workers should work more with persons with disabilities towards their effective integration in mainstream society.

Let's work with persons with disabilities in their communities to identify the accessibility challenges impacting on their lives, and together develop both practice and policy strategies to

address them. I plan to do a study in this area in the near future because I believe that accessible environment will more likely increase the effective socio-economic and political participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities as well as benefit the entire population (e.g., parents with small children, the elderly, cyclists, pregnant women).

### References

- Aldred, R. & Woodcock, J. (2008). Transport: Challenging disabling environments. *Local Environment*, 13(8), 485-496.
- Belgrave, F. Z., & Walker, S. (1991). Predictors of employment outcome of black persons with disabilities. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 36(2), 111-119.
- Brock, B. (2007). The workplace experiences of educators with disabilities: Insights for school leaders. *Educational Considerations*, 34(2), 9-14.
- Church, R. L., & Marston, J. R. (2003). Measuring accessibility for persons with a disability. *Geographical Analysis*, 35(1), 83-96.
- Crowe, T. K., Picchiarini, S., & Poffenroth, T. (2004). Community participation: Challenges for people with disabilities living in Oaxaca, Mexico, and New Mexico, United States. *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health*, 24(2), 72-80.
- Erin, J. N. (2011). Becoming commuters: Teaching students traveling to work using public transportation. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 262-265.
- Lubin, A. (2012). *Persons with disabilities seeking employment and public transportation: Findings of a New Jersey Survey*. Research Report for John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and the Kessler Foundation, New Jersey.
- McClain, L. (2000). Shopping center wheelchair accessibility: Ongoing advocacy to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. *Public Health Nursing*, 17(3), 178-186.
- Naami, A. (2014). Breaking the barriers: Ghanaian perspectives about the social model. *Disability, CBR and Inclusive Development*, 25(1), 21-39.
- Naami, A. (2010). *The impact of unemployment of women with physical disabilities in Tamale, Ghana*. Doctoral Dissertation. The College of Social Work, The University of Utah, Utah, USA.
- Naami, A. (2012). *Where are our rights?* Ghanaweb. Retrieved January 21, from <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/artikel.php?ID=247427>
- Wu, W., Gan, A., Cevallos, F., & Shen, D. (2011). Selecting bus stop for accessibility improvement for persons with physical disabilities. *Journal of Public Transportation*, 2(14), 133-149.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2012). Persons with a disability: A labor force summary. Retrieve February 17, 2012 from, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/disabl.nr0.htm>.
- About the Author:** Augustina Naami, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Northern Iowa ([augustina.naami@uni.edu](mailto:augustina.naami@uni.edu)).