



Exploring barriers in the Provision of Decent Employment for Persons with Disabilities: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Unemployment has remained a very serious issue for persons with disabilities in developing and under-developed countries. A very small number of individuals with disabilities have an access to employment in the country. This qualitative research paper aims at exploring the barriers in the provision of decent employment for PWDs in Pakistan. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted constituting purposively selected eight stakeholders. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Key barriers identified were unavailability of accurate and reliable data while making policy; weak monitoring of the policy execution; non-productive transition planning in the educational institutions; insufficient vocational training and passive role and shortage of vocational training centers; lack of demand-driven skill training; infrastructure; transportation barriers and negative attitudes of the employers towards disability. It has been recommended that an effective ecosystem to be formed to support employment for PWDs and all existing laws for their empowerment may be implemented in true letter and spirit.

Keywords: Barriers, decent employment, persons with disabilities, provision

1. Introduction

Pakistan came into being in 1947 and the first ordinance regarding employment and rehabilitation of disabled persons was enacted in 1981, called as "Disabled Persons' Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance 1981". Key features included registration of disabled persons; establishments to employ disabled persons; establishment of training centers, establishment to pay for funds, charter of duties of national and provincial councils regarding provision of employment, rehabilitation and welfare of PWDs. Efforts were made after that to have a formal national policy for PWDs, but somehow could not materialize instantly. However, after a lengthy consultative process, the first ever National policy for PWDs was formalized in 2002 named as "National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002" followed by the National Plan of Action, 2006. The National Plan of Action (NPA) is based on the philosophy that access, inclusion and equalization of opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), which form 2.49% of the population of the country, according to 1998 census could not be achieved through isolated interventions. The services may therefore to be designed in an integrated manner with the goal of full inclusion. The NPA failed to achieve the goals due to multiple factors from frequent change of government to weak execution of policy. Recently, in the year 2020, the new special education policy in the province Punjab has been formulated emphasizing to address immediate challenges of access, equity, quality, skills and poverty of PWDs (Govt of the Punjab, 2020). However, the desired outcome is still a dream come true.

Pakistan signed and ratified UNCRPD in 2011 and became the 101st country to ratify it. According to Article 27 of UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Right of the Persons with Disabilities), state parties recognize the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; this includes the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2007).

Pakistan also ratified Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), set by United Nations with the aim to end poverty and hunger by 2030. The Goal 8 of SDGs (Decent Work and Economic Growth) clearly indicates the importance of full productive employment and decent work for all, irrespective of caste, color, creed and disability. Persons with disabilities are less likely to be in full time employment than persons without disabilities (Abdul Wahab & Ayub, 2017). According to WHO estimates, at least 10% of Pakistan's population is persons with disabilities (PWDs). Of these 18 million PWDs, over 5 million live in the urban areas while the rest 13 million reside in rural areas. Only 14% of persons with disabilities are in work, rest of them are reliant on the family members for financial support (UNICEF, 2017). It is however, disappointing to report that only 136,928 PWDs have been registered with National Database & Registration Authority (NADRA) and issued national identity cards in the country (Sheikh, 2016).

Available statistics on the labor market situation of people with disabilities in developing and under-developed countries indicate that 1) the unemployment rates of persons with disabilities are up to twice high as for people without disabilities, in countries for which data is available 2) The labor force participation rate of PWDs is significantly lower than among the population as a whole, with almost half of working-age people with disabilities neither in employment nor actively looking for work in countries in Europe – and also in OECD countries 3) Majority adults with disabilities are not registered either as employed or as unemployed 4) Employed PWDs are more likely to be in low-paid jobs with poor promotional aspects 5) Women with disabilities are less likely to have a decent job as compared to women without disabilities 6) Individuals with intellectual and mental health disabilities are reported to face greater difficulties in finding decent work (ILO, 2013; WHO, 2014).

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In case of Pakistan, the situation is quite alarming as a very small number of individuals with disabilities have access to employment (Waqar, 2014). Limited education and skills training opportunities and weak/directionless transition planning in the educational institutions put persons with disabilities at a disadvantage when they seek employment (Bengisu, et al., 2008). In the current scenario, when only 14% of the disabled population are employed in Pakistan, the study intends to investigate the key barriers triggering the state of unemployment of PWDs.

2. Literature Review

Arsh, et al. (2019) reported that a very small number of persons with disabilities are employed in different government departments, failing to ensure even 2% job quota for persons with disabilities, already quite low to cover the large disabled population. Singal, et al. (2011) stated that continued marginalization of young people with disabilities in the areas of education, employment and marriage prospects have made their lives challenging and effective, rigorous interventions are recommended at priority basis in low-income countries. The issues of disability have been overlooked in Pakistan from every angle, including administrative, financial, and legal (Abdul Wahab, et al., 2016). Persons with disabilities are the most marginalized because they are unseen, unheard and uncounted in the country. There are no serious attempts by the government to conduct a comprehensive survey to assess the problems of unemployment of persons with disabilities. Limited education and skills training opportunities put PWDs at a disadvantage when they seek employment (Morwane, et al., 2021).

According to the findings of several researches, vocational education is an essential tool for integrating the special people in society and making them a productive member of a community (Yusof, et al., 2014; Wang, et al., 2019). How to prepare the special children and youth for the market, the key responsibility lies with the educational institutions. In Australia, Vocational Education and Training (VET) is based on a partnership between governments, industry and other stakeholders, and with this partnership they have been able to empower the majority children and youth with intellectual disability, who are the most marginalized in our country as far as employment is concerned (Weld-Blundell, et al., 2021).

China has achieved great progress by enacting and implementing a series of laws and policies that help them to gain access to all required provisions including education and employment (Yuan, et al., 2022). They have set teacher training bases for vocational education in a large number to meeting the needs of teacher training of various forms and various levels and currently, there are more than 1,000 vocational training institutions for the disabled in China.

In case of Pakistan, the situation is quite alarming as a very small number of individuals with disabilities have access to employment. There are approximately 60 registered vocational training centers for PWDs, that are not sufficient to cover the large working-age disabled population (Unit, 2014; Senturk & Ali, 2021). Moreover, the vocational training and skill development programs for youth with disabilities in the country do not match with the demand of the job market, leaving them jobless, helpless and dependent on their parents. (Waqar, 2014; Sajid & Ali, 2018). Successful transition planning plays an important and key role for the successful transition of children with disabilities. According to Aftab et al. (2022), the ITP or weak transition planning in the educational institutions have also been reported by parents as one of the key barriers in acquiring post-school employment for youth with disabilities. The following figure indicates the unemployment rate of disabled persons almost (70%) in developing countries and approximately (30%) in industrialized countries.

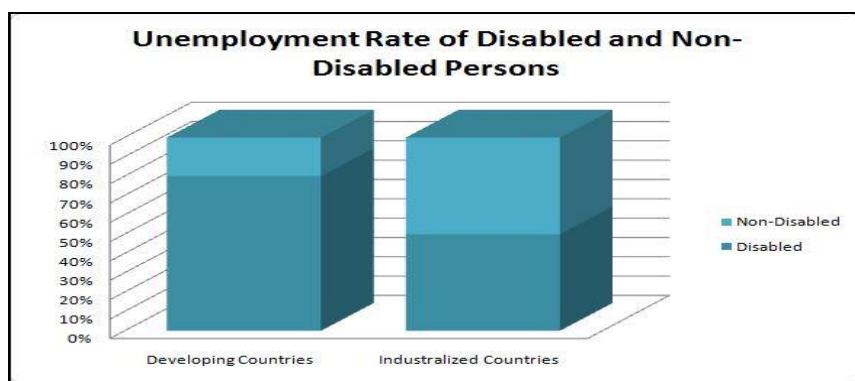


Figure 1: ILO, 2013

3. The Motivation of the Study

Persons with disabilities are not getting employment in Pakistan. Unemployment rate is getting higher day by day. Less research has been conducted regarding the barriers and obstacles regarding school-to-community transition planning of PWDs in the country. It is a constant source of stress for PWDs and their parents as how to seek decent employment, so that they could earn their living and become independent. There are attitudinal, institutional and

policy barriers that need to be identified and addressed to work towards this very serious concern in the country. PWDs are faced with several impediments including transportation and accessibility challenges at work places. They are more dependent on their parents, families, and peers for bread and butter, even after their education or skill-development training. The drive of the study is to highlight the barriers faced by PWDs in accessing employment as there is a shortage of studies conducted in this area. The study also aims at investigating the need areas in the transition planning process of PWDs.

3.1. Novelty

The study is unique as the researcher has emphasized on the key barriers in accessing employment for PWDs that has been an ignored area by the educational institutions and those responsible for policy execution. The research instrument, i.e. Focus Group Discussion used by the researcher helped to obtain a comprehensive qualitative data leading to practical findings which makes the study distinct from the previous studies. PWDs are the ones who are suffering the most due to the lack of accessible employment opportunities in the country, therefore their opinions and challenges have more weightage. The study has also highlighted a much-needed aspect of demand-driven skill development programs for individuals with disabilities in the school-curriculum. Previous studies in this area have not highlighted the serious role of vocational education and training in the institutions in the transition planning process of individuals with disabilities.

3.2. Significance of the Study

The study has a meaningful value as it underlines the challenges and barriers in obtaining decent employment for persons with disabilities. It is hoped that the findings of the study would be an eye-opener for the policy makers to make them address the identified gaps. Results of the study would make the stakeholders realize the importance of vocational training in accordance with the demands of the job market, leading them to work towards this very serious concern. The school education department would be able to re-visit their vocational training programs with collaborative support of relevant departments for smooth school-to-community transition of PWDs.

4. Methodology

The research design was qualitative in nature. According to Wagner & Maree (2007), typically, qualitative research involves engaging with and watching individuals in their natural environments in order to study people or systems. The emphasis is on the quality and depth of information rather than the breadth or extent of the material presented, and it is centered on the participant's meanings and interpretations. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted from purposively selected eight stakeholders of the field of special education. Purposive sampling, also called as subjective sampling is commonly used in qualitative research design. It facilitates the researcher to intentionally select the informants based on their ability to reveal a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon (Forrester & Sullivan, 2018). Focus Group Discussion is a type of qualitative research method for data collection. It brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group is chosen due to pre-defined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on the research questions of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The ideal size of Focus group is 8-10 subjects in addition with a facilitator, a note taker or a recording person. Here the researcher chose eight participants for FGD. The participants are free to talk with other participants in the Focus group technique. In this study, the participants were selected because they had characteristics the researcher needed in the sample to answer the research question of the study. Distribution of the Participants of Focus Group Discussion is as follows:

Table 1: Total Participants: 8

Sr. no	Participants	No.
1.	Special education teachers	1
2.	Vocational teachers	2
3.	Administrator	1
4.	Parent	1
5.	Head	1
6.	Visually-Impaired boy	1
7.	Physically Challenged boy	1

Five pre-determined set of open questions were formulated for FGD covering almost all aspects of the problem understudied. The questions were validated from three experts of the field. FGD was conducted in a very conducive and warm environment. The questions were put one by one to the participants for their in-depth opinions in the form of discussion. Responses of the participants were audio-recorded. The researcher transcribed, analyzed and interpreted the responses, and themes were drawn.

The analysis came up with three themes: Policy barriers, institutional barriers, attitudinal barriers.

5. Findings

Findings of the FGD are as follows:

5.1. Policy Barriers

The following information was provided by the participants regarding the policy barriers. Most of them highlighted the unavailability of accurate data of disability before making a policy that leaves loopholes in the policy. Moreover, there is no proper mechanism to monitor the implementation of the policy. Low quota of employment for the PWDs have also been revealed as one of the barriers by the stakeholders. Transportation challenges and physical barriers to commute to the job places have also been reported as a hurdle. The administrator reported:

"I have been working in the relevant department for 12 years. I have observed that policy is good and advocates right for persons with disabilities. However, the sad part is that the policy is not executed in a proper manner. It is not monitored adequately and that is one of the major barriers that hinder the employment of PWDs".

A head of special education institution informed,

"The low quota of employment prevents jobs of persons with disabilities. The youth-disabled population is much more in number as compared to the job opportunities in the market. The youth who leave high schools are very frustrated as they are not getting employment, and their parents are very upset. The policy makers should take a serious note of increasing the quota for employment of PWDs."

A parent of physically challenged boy revealed,

"My child did graduation, and after a year he got a job in a company as a receptionist. He went there for few days, but had to leave because of his mobility and safety issues. The company has no transportation facility for its employees, and the public transportation is not safe and the pick-up stop is far from home. The work place has also physical barriers that hinder his mobility and toilets are in-adequate to cater to his disability. He is jobless and sitting at home. The government should address this issue of making public transportation disability-friendly to resolve this challenge, or make mandatory that all organizations provide transport facility to the employed PWDs".

5.2. Institutional Barriers

Following information was extracted by the researcher through FGD regarding institutional barriers. Most of them informed that the schools are unable to make an effective transition plan leading them to employment. The vocational teachers are not sufficiently trained to teach the demand-driven skills to the learners with disabilities in schools. Collaborative support of relevant organizations is required to address this issue. Lack of vocational training centers and low quota of employment for PWDs have also been indicated as barriers. The transition planning is ineffective in the schools, failing to produce desired results. A special education teacher reported:

"We make ITP (Individual Transition Plan) for children and youth in schools. However, lack of collaborative support with other departments and vocational training centers, children are unable to be trained to be empowered later in life."

Another special education teacher informed,

"Our children who leave school do not get jobs, they and their parents are frustrated. I feel, one of the reasons is that skill development programs in our schools are non-practical and insufficient and not designed keeping in view the students' functional skills and interest. There is a need of a viable framework in the vocational training curriculum of the schools. Those students who get higher education are not being accommodated in employment because of low quota for PWDs which is unfortunate".

A vocational teacher informed,

"I am not so much trained to train the demand-driven skills to youth with disabilities. The skills taught to the children in the schools are not aligned with the demands of the job market. Our children are left behind due to lack of targeted skill-development programs. First, we need training to train the students. The schools should take the support of other departments and vocational training centers that lead them to post-school employment."

Another vocational teacher stated,

"We have failed to provide job opportunities to our students with disabilities. We emphasize on their formal education more, not on vocational education as there is no formal vocational program designed for them. We are also aware that most of the students fall in trainable category, and at some point, they will have to discontinue their education to move towards skill development."

A mother of hearing-impaired child informed,

"There is a lack of vocational training centers for the disabled in the country. The schools do not prepare them for jobs, and outside schools the general vocational training centers are reluctant to enroll them in their centers. We feel helpless, and appeal to the government to establish separate vocational training centers to cover large-disabled population."

5.3. Attitudinal Barriers

Most of the participants informed that discriminatory attitude on the part of employers and society have closed the way to decent employment for the youth with disabilities. Even if they get the jobs, the physical environment and non-cooperative/inflexible approach of the employers and workplaces do not let them continue their work. A visually-impaired participant in grief informed,

"I have applied in so many call centers to be an operator as my communication skills are very good. No body calls me for the interview to gauge my skills when they come to know that I have low-vision. They prefer sighted individuals even if they do not meet that job criteria. It is so painful and discriminatory."

A physically challenged participant reported,

"I did intermediate and could not continue my studies further due to financial constraint. Nobody was willing to give me a job because I am wheel-chair bound and our physical environment is not disability-friendly. My computer skills are good. I found a clerical job in a company but could not stay there long since that company's office was on 7th floor. There was a lift to reach there but when the lift is out of order and in case of load shedding. I had to return home as there was no other option left for me. Due to my absence from the office, the employer fired me without even listening and addressing to this genuine problem. The attitude of the employers is not satisfactory towards individuals with disabilities."

The head of special education school stated,

"There is no proper framework of skill-development programs in schools, and those children who leave schools are unable to get the jobs. People outside have very biased and intolerant attitude towards them and do not employ them, or even keep them as internee. Their parents are in stress and they come back to us, requesting either to keep them back in schools or make arrangement for their jobs. Neither we can sustain them in the institutions nor seek employment for them."

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study has focused on the opinions of the stakeholders in the special education field. It has been concluded from the findings that unavailability or inaccurate data, in addition to weak monitoring of policy are barriers to employment for PWDs. Low disabled quota, physical barriers and transportation challenges are obstacles. Institutional barriers like weak transition planning and skill development programs; lack of vocational training centers; teachers' training, and passive role of relevant departments trigger the unemployment of PWDs. Employers' discriminatory and inflexible approach to accommodate disabled employees are huge barriers in attaining employment.

Findings of Focus Group Discussion revealed that that the policy for PWDs is not implemented in the true sense due to weak monitoring mechanism. Unavailability of accurate data is a retarding factor, too in the planning process. Shortage of practical skill development programs in schools and lack of vocational centers for the disabled impede the employment process of PWDs (Yuan, et al., 2022). It has been reported that the employers' discriminatory attitude, work-place physical environment and transportation barriers do not let the disabled persons to acquire and continue their jobs or work at ease. Moreover, low disabled employment quota does not cater to the large working-age disabled population (Arsh, et al., 2019) Transition planning of individuals with disabilities in the schools is not done keeping in view the interest, abilities and the demand of the job market (Aftab et al., 2022). The barriers discussed and explored give a clear picture to the policy makers and stake holders to consider high unemployment rate of PWDs as a serious concern, otherwise they will not be able to sustain themselves in the society.

6.1. Recommendations

There is a need to build an effective ecosystem of employment for persons with disabilities in Pakistan. These may include:

- Collection/updating of reliable data about prevalence of disability
- Mechanism for monitoring policy implementation
- Increase in the disabled quota for employment of PWDs
- A viable school-to-community transition framework in the school curriculum
- Establishment of vocational training services/centers for disabled
- Utilization of vocational training programs for in-service vocational teachers administered by the federal, provincial, district governments and private agencies.
- Linkages with relevant government and non-government establishments for collaborative support
- Demand driven skill-training programs in educational institutions
- Job-matching support.
- Creating barrier free physical environment at job places
- Counteracting transportation challenges for PWDs
- Giving incentives, financial assistance, and exclusive contracts to enterprises employing workers with disabilities

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