

## **MALAYSIAN DISABLED WOMEN EXPERIENCES IN EMPLOYMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Many disabled people face significant environmental and attitudinal barriers in their employment experience in Malaysia. Despite various employment policies and incentives provided by the government to encourage employment for disabled workers, previous findings demonstrate that employment rates among disabled people are low and there are no official statistics on the actual numbers of disabled people in employment. This paper therefore seeks to explore how Malaysian women with physical impairment experience their opportunity for employment. This full qualitative study employed in-depth interviews research method with 33 Malaysian women with mobility (physical) impairment. The in-depth interviews were conducted twice within 6 months with 17 Malays, 8 Chinese and 8 Indian women who were interviewed in Peninsular Malaysia. The research findings found that disabled women faced three major issues in their employment experiences: structural barriers in employment, attitudinal barriers and discrimination in employment and also sheltered (secluded) employment. Therefore, this paper will discuss how these employment issues significantly impacted on the wellbeing of Malaysian women with physical impairment.*

Keywords: disabled women, structural barriers, attitudinal barriers and discrimination, sheltered employment, Malaysia.

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### **Introduction**

Research into the career experience of disabled women in Malaysia found that disabled women encountered significant discrimination in terms of job appointments, career appraisals, physical barriers at the workplace and work related places, a lack of support from leaders and a lack of understanding about disability issues as demonstrated by employers (Faridah, 2003). Other countries also found that disabled women experienced some forms of discrimination in employment. Dhungana (2006) for instance found that gender bias exists in terms of training and employment opportunities in Nepal, whilst Cameroonian disabled women experienced 'three-fold' discrimination in terms of gender, perceived inability, and low socio-economic status (Kiani, 2009). Disabled women in China are also found to have a lower income than disabled men as many women stay at home, especially in rural areas (Zhang, 2007). Women in the Arab countries are also reported as having limited labour force participation. In the national census of Kuwait, only two percent of disabled women were in the labour force as compared to about 10 percent of disabled men (Nagata, 2003). Accordingly, disabled women across countries may experience gender disparity when compared to disabled men.

Whilst the Malaysian government has introduced various employment policies and incentives to encourage employment for disabled people, findings demonstrate that employment rates among them are still too low (Ramakrishnan, 2007; Mubarak, 2006; Faridah, 2003; Jayasooria, 1997). Many disabled people from various categories of impairment are unemployed, as compared to the larger population, and this effect may be more profound for disabled women. Malaysian disabled women may not only encounter the environmental and attitudinal barriers in relation to their disability but also the socio-cultural constraints. For example until the 1960s Malaysian society had a commonly held belief that women were ideally suited as housewives and, when educated, they should work as teachers, nurses, or in similar 'feminine' occupations (Koshal et al., 1998). Also, the primary role of women is assumed to be that of home-maker and the women's status is perceived to be lower than men in all three main ethnic groups - Malay, Chinese and Indian: this despite the increasing numbers of women now entering the workforce (Noraini, 1999). Therefore, disabled women may not be perceived as equal to disabled men in securing employment because the society values men as breadwinners, rather than women.

Nevertheless, women's employment has undergone structural changes in the Malaysian economy. The shift from being an agricultural economy to being one based on industry and services has rapidly increased women's employment in the wholesale, retail trade, hotel, restaurant sector and also the financial segment (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2007). It has marked a steady incremental increase of women's participation in the labour force which witnessed an increase of about 44.7 percent in 1995 to 46.1 percent in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). Although current trends show

significant improvement in the participation of women at work, the rate is far lower than men as evidenced by the fact that 70.5 percent women did not participate in the labour force compared to only 29.5 percent of men being outside the labour force in 2011 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). Disabled women face even greater risk of unemployment. Thus, women in general are still behind men regarding participation at the workforce.

Although there was a slight increase in women's participation in the labour force as more women became likely to work, the decision to work or not may depend on the burden of work, childcare, and household duties (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2007). It is noted that women's enrolment in the labour force is associated with the attitude of the family towards women (Aminah, 1998). The changing attitudes of parents and husbands encouraging higher educational attainment of women could be a factor affecting women's participation at work (Fatimah, 1993). The non-traditional attitude towards gender roles by husbands also has important implications for rural women's economic participation as women would be less burdened with household chores (Aminah and Narimah, 1992). A positive attitude of a husband and wife on equality regarding domestic work could allow women to participate in the labour force more effectively and this may also affect married disabled women.

In addition, previous studies established that women are generally represented within the subordinate management and lower paying positions (Yusof, 1995; Tan, 1991). Similarly, in business organisations and private sectors, women were found not to be getting equal opportunities for promotion after recruitment. Female managers also received resistance from both male and female subordinates with respect to their career advancement (Koshal et al., 1998). As indicated in the Global Gender Gap Index 2012, Malaysia ranked very low - 98 out of 135 countries - for the gap between women and men on economic participation and opportunity (World Economic Forum, 2012). Obviously, career advancement for women still lags behind that of men, and is restricted to lower positions as opposed to attainment of higher-level or decision-making positions.

Another common dilemma of working women in the private sector is the wage differences relative to their male colleagues. The policy of unequal pay between men and women employed has been well rooted since the colonial era. Later, when Malaysia obtained independence from the British in 1957:

the policy of unequal pay between men and women was continued by the government until the struggles by women's groups and trade unions succeeded in achieving equality in pay for all government employees in 1969 (Rohana, 1997: 58-60).

This was strengthened when Malaysia ratified the ILO Convention No.100 on equality of wages between men and women in September 1997, which decreed that women should receive equal payment to men in the public sector. However, disparity of wages between men and women still continues in the private sector (NGO Shadow Report Group, 2005). On average, women earn less than men; particularly in labour intensive industries. In this respect disabled women may not only experience environmental and attitudinal barriers at the workplace but also unequal payment. The NGOs and rights activists have demanded that the government establish a minimum wage in the private sector (NGO Shadow Report Group, 2005). In response to this, the government introduced a minimum wage for the first time in July 2012 (Ministry of Human Resource Malaysia, 2013) and as such the gender disparity in payment is envisaged as being reduced in the future.

Therefore, disabled women in Malaysia are not only subjected to unequal treatment in employment mainly due to their disability, but also because of their gender status. This paper seeks to explore how Malaysian women with physical impairment experience their opportunity for employment. The following section examines the methodologies used in this study. The paper then discusses the research findings in three sections: structural barriers in employment, attitudinal barriers and discrimination in employment and also sheltered (secluded) employment. The paper concludes by discussing the link between the research objectives and the findings as well as some suggestions and limitations of the research.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This full qualitative study was conducted in three states of Peninsular Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. However, the majority of informants formerly lived in other states in Malaysia; all over the country including states in Borneo. The data of this study was collected from in-depth interviews with 33 Malaysian women with physical (mobility) impairment. The majority of women came from low-income and rural families and thus many of them had limited access to basic living needs; such as healthcare, transportation, education and training, as well as employment.

Over a period of 6 months, 17 Malays, 8 Chinese and 8 Indian women were interviewed twice. The research participants' age ranged from 21 to 57 years old. They had physical impairment (mobility impairment) as a result of spinal cord injury, polio, spinal muscular atrophy, muscular dystrophy, marfan syndrome, systemic lupus erythematosus, traumatic brain injury, gestational diabetes mellitus, osteosarcoma, spina bifida, teratoma, dysmelia, leg amputation and leg injury. The recruitment of the participants took three different strategies – recruitment via: non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for disabled people (six NGOs for disabled people in Malaysia), disabled friends' networking, and snowballing.

This full qualitative research used narrative approach (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000; Creswell, 2007) that explores the lived experiences of the participants. The majority of participants were interviewed twice in 6 months to understand their lives in relation to employment experiences. The time interval between the first and second interview was 3 to 6 months. The in-depth interviews were conducted twice to give space to the research participants to share experiences that are more sensitive in the second interview. They were interviewed in a conducive environment such as at the non-governmental organization premises and

the research participants' home. The data gathered from the in-depth interviews were transcribed and then organised in a computer software - NVivo 9 and they were analysed by using thematic analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The women interviewed had a range of employment experience. The majority of them (25) were currently working at various levels, while seven of them were not working and one was still studying. Of the 25 working women, seven were working in a residential workshop for disabled people, seven were working with NGOs, three were working from home, three were working at a professional level, and five were working at a non-professional level.

The majority (24) of them received RM300 monthly for the Disabled Employee Allowance (EPC). Those who received the EPC had on average RM50 to RM1200 income per month. This can be regarded as very low considering that the mean household income for Malaysian in 2009 was RM4,025 per month (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). Thus, it can be argued that the majority of participants had a very low income, even when they managed to secure employment.

### *Structural barriers to employment*

As observed in the previous sections on healthcare, transportation, and education and training structural barriers in the workplace also became the main issue for many of the women interviewed. Many participants were unable to take up their desired job because the workplace was not accessible for them.

Yana<sup>1</sup> for example, expressed her disappointment at how environmental barriers had denied her the opportunity for employment:

After I finished my tailoring training at the rehabilitation centre, I went home. Then I got a few job offers. But I couldn't take them because all the shops were located on upper floors. One of them was offered by a disabled employer [crutches user]. But her shop was also located on level 1. So, I had to let it go as I couldn't take steps with my wheelchair.

In Malaysia, tailoring is a low paid job and most of the tailoring is done in inaccessible workshops on the first floor above a shop because the rent is cheaper compared to offices on the ground floor. It suggests that the physical environment for tailoring jobs in Malaysia is not designed to include people with mobility impairment, especially wheelchair users. Nevertheless, most of vocational centres for disabled people run by the DSW and the NGOs are offering a tailoring course as one of their main training courses for people with physical impairment; especially for women. Consequently, despite having tailoring skills, many of the women had found that they were unable to secure employment because of this structural barrier.

Likewise, Imah described:

My third job was with a tele-marketing company. I did not work for long - it was only six months. I had to quit because the company asked me to go outside to find the clients. It was a credit card company. Before this - when I started the work, I was never asked to work outside the office, because it was hard for me since I use a wheelchair, so I decided to resign. It was a hard decision for me because I had difficulty finding a job after that. I was unemployed for almost a year after I quit from the company. At that time I felt so helpless because I had some bills to pay and my family started to ask me when I would get a job. It was really tough for me at that time.

As wheelchair users these women had limited access to the workplace building and outdoor working environment because many public places were not accessible to them. It was not only the physical environment that prevented them from taking the employment but the nature of their impairment itself limited their ability to work in certain types of work such as those located in an outdoor working environment. This thus suggests that both the structural barriers, and nature of impairment, acted as barriers to undertaking employment. Therefore limited employment opportunities and abilities for women with mobility impairment, especially regarding for those in wheelchairs, prevented them from having secure financial prospects and as such it led to poverty.

### *Attitudinal barriers and discrimination in employment*

Many of the women interviewed not only encountered structural barriers in the workplace but also met with negative attitudes from both employers and prospective employers. Zahra told how constant rejection from potential employers just because she used a wheelchair made her feel worthless:

Companies out there don't want to take on disabled people who use a wheelchair, like me. I felt so upset and wanted to cry at that time when they looked down on me. Why? Do those of us in a wheelchair not deserve to work? One of the employers said to me 'miss, there is no need for you to bring your certificates while you are still in a wheelchair'. I was so upset. I went for job interviews so many times until I became frustrated and went back to my hometown.

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<sup>1</sup> All the participants' names were referred to using pseudonyms to protect their identity and to ensure anonymity.

Despite having vocational training in computing from the DSW, it did not exempt her from such discrimination in employment. As a result, she ended up in a sheltered employment for disabled people for 10 years. Many of the women were not only discriminated against when seeking employment; even when they had secured employment they were still oppressed by their employer as described by Wei Yin:

My first job was so terrible. I was 'kicked off' [dismissed] by my boss on the first day. He said that the work was not suitable for me. He was afraid that I might fall down at the workplace. Maybe he thought I was not capable as he looked at the way I walked [she had polio and used callipers].

Similarly, Pushpa also faced discrimination from her employer - just because she requested an accessible toilet at her workplace:

After six months working, I approached my boss. I told my boss, 'boss, if you don't mind I want to make a proposal for a disabled toilet *lah*'. He said to me, '*aiya*, you're the only disabled one working here, why should I spend so much money on a toilet for you?' [...] Then the manager told me he could not give me a toilet [...] What he did was, he said, 'if you're happy with the job, you stay, if you're not happy, you can leave'. He said it like that but I still didn't want to leave my job. After six months, he dismissed me with one week's notice. Then I filed a report to MTUC [Malaysian Trade Union Congress].

Pushpa's refusal to accept such discrimination resulted in a successful compensation of three months payment through a mediation initiated by the MTUC between her and her former employer. Whilst she was able to exercise her agency, the structural and attitudinal barriers that she experienced in employment resulted in significant psycho-emotional impact on her wellbeing.

#### *Sheltered (secluded) employment*

As mentioned above, seven women were working in a sheltered or secured employment for disabled people in a rural area run by an NGO. Most of them decided to take this employment because they were unable to find a suitable job with accessible transport and accommodation. Therefore they took the employment and lived in a hostel provided in the workshop.

Their main job in the workshop was folding envelopes for governmental agencies from 8am to 5pm, five days per week. Although they were provided with free accommodation, the income they received was very low when compared to the mean household income for Malaysians (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). All except one of them lived in the institution and far from their family. Two of them had lived there for more than 10 years and they never had opportunity to find a job or live outside the workshop.

Besides having low incomes, these women were also marginalised and excluded from society at large. The workshop was located in a remote area, far from the city and as such restricted their opportunities for wider economic and social activities. Most of their time was spent in the workshop with their disabled friends. They were also constrained by the rules in the workshop that restricted them from pursuing leisure activities. The majority of women described how they had mundane routines in the workshop that made them feel bored and lonely as they lived far from families, friends, and the city.

Shanti spent 12 years in the workshop and described the social restrictions in place:

They did not allow me to go out. They said that the police would catch me because I wanted to go out with my best friend there who was learning disabled. We didn't want to do bad things we just wanted to go shopping. I also wanted to have leisure activities like other people out there.

Although the institution permitted its residents to go out during weekends, Shanti was an exception to this rule. The workshop management staff did not allow her to go out during the weekends because she wanted to bring along her best friend who had a learning disability. As she was physically impaired she needed help from her best friend to push her wheelchair. She felt discriminated against by her organisation as her autonomy and right for leisure activities were compromised. This significantly impacted on her psycho-emotional wellbeing.

Despite some rules in the workshop, some of the women felt socially isolated due to their low income. For example Zahra, who had lived for 10 years in the institution, told how she spent most of her time in the workshop because she could not afford to have leisure activities outside it:

At the weekends, most of the time I prefer to stay in the hostel doing my work like cleaning my room, watching TV or reading books. I know that it's boring but I have no choice. I will only go out if I have extra money. You know that I only receive RM100 for my salary and RM300 for the EPC. So, I can't afford going out for shopping. I rarely going out, sometimes I just ask my friend to help me buy things when they go out. If I go out I need to pay the taxi, food and many other things

Therefore Zahra's poverty intersected with disablism and consequently it undermined her wellbeing. The examples given by the women of their experiences in the sheltered employment scheme clearly showed how they were systematically excluded from wider social activities and lived in an isolated environment, although they had a (low paid) job. It thus suggests that they were 'trapped' in a perpetual cycle of poverty, being excluded from developmental opportunities, and subjected to social isolation.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discusses how Malaysian women with physical impairment experience their opportunity for employment. The research findings found that disabled women faced three major issues in their employment experiences: structural barriers in employment, attitudinal barriers and discrimination in employment and also sheltered (secluded) employment. For a developing country like Malaysia it was important to observe how a lack of accessibility both in rural and urban areas, and poverty, had significantly impacted disabled women's wellbeing in terms of their employment opportunities, educational and training attainments. At the same time, lack of support from the welfare state and societal disabling attitudes towards these women also played important roles in excluding them from wider social and economic activities. These findings showed how disabled women in Malaysia had limited employment opportunities in the workforce.

The structural and attitudinal barriers that hindered equal opportunity for employment prevented their prospects for financial freedom, leading them to poverty. Limited opportunities from having wider prospects in employment restricted their full potential as active agents in society. Therefore, the state multi-agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource as well as the NGOs should work together in supporting the needs and ability of women with disabilities at the workplace. All parties should work together in promoting disabled women's rights for equal opportunity for employment. Continuous campaigns and incentives to encourage employers at all sectors to employ disabled women should be enhanced. The government should also introduce law enforcement to penalize those who discriminate disabled people from securing job opportunities especially those who refuse to take disabled women as employer.

Disabled women do not only experience structural and attitudinal barriers that led them to negative financial outcomes but they also experienced significant psycho-social issues. For instance, disabled women faced constant rejection from employers in getting job opportunities and continues environmental challenges at the workplace. These experiences have made disabled women felt stress and hopeless and thus led them to experience long term psycho-emotional pressure. Moreover, the systematic exclusion from the community as many of the women interviewed lived in a sheltered employment also led them to experience psycho-social isolation. Such experiences may cause them to feel lonely and secluded from the general population and these can bring negative outcomes to their wellbeing. Therefore, disabled women should be supported with psycho-emotional support such as counselling services and peer support group activities.

This paper examined how Malaysian women with physical impairment experience their employment opportunity. The findings showed that there were three main challenges experience by disabled women in terms of structural barriers in employment, attitudinal barriers and discrimination in employment and also sheltered (secluded) employment that restricted their financial and social freedom in society. This research however focusing on women with mobility impairment only and does not involve women from other categories of impairment. In view of that the findings may not be applicable to those with other types of impairment. Nevertheless, many issues unveiled in this research are linked to the general findings found in other disability research in Malaysia. Accordingly, prospective research may include women from different category or level of impairment to gain broader understanding of disability and employment experiences in Malaysia. Likewise, this study does not include participation from the employer of the women interviewed and therefore their views may be equally as important as those of the research participant and could potentially be discovered in the future research.

In conclusion, all parties including the governmental and private sectors should play their roles in supporting disabled women to secure employment and at the workplace to ensure that their rights and wellbeing are being protected.

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