

A STUDY ON IMPACTS OF UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG PERSON WITH DISABILITIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

For a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between a country's domestic crisis and the living conditions of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), it is essential to explore the employment challenges faced by PwDs. This qualitative research paper focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PwDs. Specifically, this research aims at discussing the impacts of Covid-19 on PwDs' employment experiences in Kuala Lumpur. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select six informants of the study. They were selected based on the criteria of inclusion that dictated the informants must be PwDs, aged between 25 to 35 years old and employed or retrenched. It was observed that PwDs faced several employments related challenges during Covid 19 pandemic. Among them include mental health problem, lack of accessibilities to workplace, presence of physical and attitudinal barriers in the workplace, job loss and stigmatisation. To solve this problem, certain policies need to be considered, such as reasonable accommodation, changing from welfare approach towards rights-based approach, improving policies by including PwDs in decision making and improving disability awareness by providing training for the employer. It is expected that the findings of this study would further enrich the literature regarding the issue of the condition of the PwDs in Malaysia by demonstrating the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on the daily life and employment prospects of PwDs. Hence, future studies about the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic upon the condition of PwDs in Malaysia should further concentrate on the impact of unemployment among persons with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The values of treating PwDs with respect and dignity as per their basic rights as human beings lies within the education system of Malaysia.

Keywords: Disability, Rights, Challenges, COVID-19, Employment experiences

INTRODUCTION

According to the Persons with Disabilities Act (2008), the term PwDs " include those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments that when interacting with various barriers, can restrict their full and effective participation in society". Based on the Social Statistics Bulletin, Malaysia, the registered persons with Disabilities (PwDs) at the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia in 2017 were 453,258 persons. Persons with disabilities in the physical category recorded the highest number which was (35.2%) followed by the Learning disability category (34.8%), visually impaired category (8.9%) and Speech category recorded the lowest registration of 0.5% (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2018)

As the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020, most of the countries in this world were launched into an economic recession leading to millions of job losses which in the Asia pacific region saw a drop of 4.2 percent in employment (Elder et al, 2020). For persons with disabilities, the pandemic presents new obstacles especially in terms of securing and maintaining employment status. The Covid-19 health crisis has turned into a global economic crisis, putting the health, jobs, and incomes of millions of people around the world at risk (International Labour Organization, 2019). According to a report by Bernama on December 12, 2020, by June 2019 the total number of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) within the civil service was only 3,686, a minuscule 0.29% of the civil service workforce (BERNAMA, 2021), in manifesting the rate of employment. Therefore, it can be safely assumed, considering the high unemployment rate of Malaysians since 2020, that the percentage of employed PwDs has only become smaller in the overall workforce, not just in the civil service. In truth, persons with disabilities or PwDs are still one of the most easily discriminated against social groups in Malaysian society (Khoo et al, 2013). They are easily discarded and easily ignored leading to workplace discrimination and exploitation against PwDs, unfortunately it is invisible to the public masses except in the unlikely event of a major crisis.

As we are all aware, the Covid-19 pandemic is still a major problem faced by Malaysians. Recently movement control measures in Malaysia have begun to loosen and the rate of vaccination has been steadily increasing. Yet, the damage it has done to the employment conditions of PwDs remains unremedied. If this situation continues for the PwDs their employability and

financial survival will only grow worse. Since, unlike non-disabled persons, the PwDs would not be considered by employers as priority hires. Even if employers began to consider hiring PwDs once more, they will only do so after a very long period. Often times the PwD would be the last ones hired and the first ones fired (Lengnick-Hall et al, 2007). If this situation continues it might set a negative precedent in Malaysian society in which abandoning and ignoring the plight of the vulnerable such as PwDs would not be considered to be something worthy of reprimand by either the government or society. Of course, another angle in which we could perceive the negative effect of the unemployment of PwDs is in its financial cost to the country in general. This statement may seem peculiar for those who have read up on the issues of the employment of PwDs. Since many employers has used the increasing cost of renovating their facilities to accommodate the PwDs as a rationale for not employing them. Henceforth, this research intends to shed further light on the plight and conditions of the PwD impacted by unemployment during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The objective of this study is basically to explore the challenges faced by PwDs during the pandemic as there is a general decline in economic activity happening around the world. As such, the study has the following objectives:

- 1) To explain how PwDs reflect on their unemployment challenges during Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2) To find out how the government and NGOs should address the issues of PwDs in the employment sector, apart from the current policy in place.

LITERATURE REVIEW

DEFINITIONS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Persons with Disabilities was defined as a person with a long term impairment and in return of that, facing barriers that limit their full participation in society, as defined in the United Nations Conventions of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which defines disability as “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” (United Nations, 2006, p.5), in which, according to Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) Act 2008 “Persons with disabilities include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society” (Laws of Malaysia Online Version of Updated Text of Reprint Persons with Disabilities Act, 2008), adopting the definition from UNCRPD.

RATE OF UNEMPLOYMENT

The unemployment rate among persons with disabilities during Covid-19 is increasing day by day. One journal stated that during the outbreak of the Covid-19 in India, workers who are persons with disabilities across 10 localities became unemployed overnight due to the shutdown of businesses and factories. While in China 81.7% of massage shops with blind therapists that were surveyed by CNR news struggled to maintain their businesses or closed their businesses (Halid et al., 2020).

Thus, from this policy paper, it is not hard to imagine the difficulties faced by Malaysians persons with disabilities. However, hard statistics specifically regarding the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in Malaysia could be found from certain notable news agencies such as BERNAMA. According to BERNAMA in July 2019 they found that the number of persons with disabilities in the civil service was 3,686, merely 0.29% of the civil service workforce (BERNAMA, 2021). While in 2020 the percentage of PwDs employed increased to 0.33%, reflecting the 4,488 PwDs employed into the civil service workforce (Twelfth Malaysia Plan, 2021-2025, 2021). This shows only a slight increase in the participation of PwDs in public service, yet despite this increase, it does not achieve the 1% employment policy envisioned by the government. Unfortunately, this figure is most likely outdated by this point in 2022, not to mention that the report does not cover those persons with disabilities working in the private sector. The reason why this research had to refer to such incomplete statistics is that no statistical data specifically regarding the current employment status of persons with disabilities in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur can be found in recent publications.

Despite that, some researchers try to if not give completely accurate data regarding the employment of persons with disabilities in Kuala Lumpur, or at least try to give the closest approximation to a statistic regarding the employment rate among persons with disabilities in Kuala Lumpur. In a study about the socio-economic situation of persons with disabilities in Malaysia (Nasir, 2020), the study discovered that from a sample size of 146 Malaysian persons with disabilities (50% from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor), 55.8% percent of them are employed while the rest are either student, retired, unemployed or unable to work. Hence, though the percentage of employed persons with disabilities is higher compared to the unemployed, it is only higher by a narrow margin. Though this does not necessarily represent the true number of unemployment rates among PwDs in Kuala Lumpur, it does give us some clue to the possible figure.

Another paper that was consulted regarding the unemployment of persons with disabilities is from a research paper made in Britain by Paula Holland. Though this paper was made regarding the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the United Kingdom, its findings are still relevant to Malaysia. From its findings, it is found out that during the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK from December 2019 until December 2020, the unemployment rate among persons with disabilities has fallen by 3.8% whereas prior to that at the end of 2019 the employment rate of persons with disabilities was 55% (Holland, 2021). This shows the apparent difficulty of persons with disabilities when it comes to their employability and the ease with which they could be terminated from employment. As stated before, this analysis can easily be applied to a developing country like Malaysia. In another study made regarding the rate of unemployment of persons with disabilities by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of America. The bureau found that employment of people with disability decreased from 19.3% in 2019 to 17.9% in 2020. While the actual rate of unemployment of persons with disability is 12.6% in 2020, an increase by 5.3%, compared to the unemployment rate of workers without disability which is 7.9%. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

The final literature that needs to be reviewed regarding the rate of unemployment of persons with disability is the literature by the Office of Disability Employment Policy of the U.S. department of labor .In this literature, it was seen that the unemployment rate of PwDs had declined drastically by the year 2019, reaching only 6.1% compared to 16.9% in 2011. However, in February 2020, that unemployment rate increased by 7.8%. Ever since then, the rate of unemployment of PwDs has steadily increased to a greater degree compared to workers without disability. The highest was in April 2020, the unemployment rate of PwDs in April 2020 was 18.9% while the unemployment rate of workers without disabilities is 14.3%. Yet, this percentage projection is mild compared to the proportion of PwDs on layoffs (workers who are not working but not terminated from employment). The rate of layoffs for PwDs was as high as 75.2% in April 2020, however that layoff rate has drastically decreased to 27.2% in September (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2020). Unfortunately, despite the improvement in the employment prospects of PwDs based on the data of the layoff rate in September, the fact that the layoff rate could reach as high as 75.2% in April is an alarming realization for PwDs who are looking for employment. From the literature review that was made regarding the unemployment rate of the PwDs during the outbreak of the Covid-19, it can be safely inferred that for the unemployed persons with disabilities living in Kuala Lumpur during the outbreak of Covid-19, they also face a similar situation.

CAUSES OF UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG PwDs

When it comes to the explanation of why PwDs tend to face a more dogged challenge to employment, various researchers and professionals have come up with a multitude of explanations for the PwDs' unemployment. In research made by the U.S. Department of Education, three possible explanations were proposed as an explanation for why PwDs face so much challenge getting employed which includes, the lower level of education of PwDs, the negative stereotype of PwDs believed by the employer and the fear of lawsuits by the employer if they terminate their PwDs workers (Lengnick-Hall et al, 2007).

In another research made to identify the factors of unemployment of PwDs or the level of employability of PwDs, the researchers made their study by performing a quantitative study on employers and employees of six private IT companies in Hyderabad, India. In this study a total of 200 participants were utilized, 147 of them are PwDs and 53 of them were employees and each of the participants are required to complete a semi structured questionnaire. From the results of the study, it is determined that 95% of the respondents consider the difficulty of access to the worksite was a concern for the employability of PwDs and overall, most of the respondents consider communication barriers, social attitudes, discrimination, harassment at workplace and lack of information to significant barriers to employability of PwDs (Ramachandra et al, 2017). From the findings of this research, we can infer that among all the factors for the challenges to the employability of PwDs, the factor of the difficulty of access to the worksite is the most important challenge to the employability of PwDs.

In a study made in Malaysia, it is determined that the challenges to PwDs in employment are perception and discrimination, workplace environment, lack of family support and inadequate education and training. For perception and discrimination, the PwDs face challenge to unemployment due to the attitude of employers who are not considerate. For the workplace environment, this involves the lack of proper facilities for PwDs workers. Regarding the lack of family support, a lot of parents of disabled children did not provide adequate support to their children such as not enrolling them in the Social Welfare Department (Rozali et al, 2017). There are significant barriers in putting people with disabilities to work, even though they have the right to do so. They consist of discrimination and the stigma that is associated with having a disability. In terms of stigma, it occurs because of the expectation that persons with disabilities are less able to contribute to the good of the family and the community, and the assumption that they are a burden (Mostert, 2016). And medicalization of disability establishes the duality between who counts as able-bodied and who counts as disabled by rating a labourer's body "by the level of impairment suffered by their functioning parts," thus making disability still ultimately defined in terms of whether someone is medically able to work (Maybee, 2019). It is also reported that some of the employers decline to hire PwD due to certain reasons. Selected reasons such as, less confidence in PwD and the fear of burden by PwD in terms of compromising the productivity of the corporate mechanism might trigger PwD exclusion in the employment market (Omar et al (2021). And this has become the norm of the corporate world. Finally, regarding inadequate education and training, the Malaysian education system still has a problem in providing its students with skills and knowledge that is desirable to employers. Though this affects all Malaysian students, it especially affects PwDs students who already face various other obstacles to employment opportunities.

INITIATIVES GIVEN BY THE GOVERNMENT AND OTHER PARTIES TO HELP PWD DURING COVID-19

However, through the hardship being faced by the persons with disabilities, there are many initiatives taken by the government to help persons with disabilities to survive during the pandemic. According to A.U.M. Shah et al. (2020a) "Malaysia was one of the first countries to come out with various quick responses to protect its citizens from Covid-19" (p.112). The Malaysian government has taken an initiative to help the disabled who are unemployed by providing an allowance and networking program. Several financial aid package plans provided by the government includes PRIHATIN, PENJANA, and PERMAI Abdul Nasir (2021). All the packages offered to persons with disabilities are a step taken by the government to help those persons with disabilities who suffered financially due to the pandemic.

SUGGESTIONS OF PWD POLICY TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT

After the literatures has been consulted, it is suggested that provisions should be made for technical assistance and advisory support to employers. This is to assist them to effectively place job seekers with disabilities in jobs suited to their skills and capacities, and to identify required changes and reasonable accommodation (International Labour Organization, 2019). Reasonable accommodations are defined as any adjustments that permit people with disabilities to achieve equal employment opportunities until the required modifications do not result in "undue hardship for the employer" (MacDonald et al, 2008). Another type of

suggestion is from a human rights perspective. Equality and non-discrimination are central human rights values and are at the core of the right to work. Ensuring equality and non-discrimination in employment access is crucial, as the labour market reflects the social prejudices and shortcomings that undermine equality and dignity (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the collection of literature reviews that this paper has analysed, it is believed that the phenomena of discrimination and high unemployment rate of persons with disabilities could be explained by a social theory called the "Social Model of Disability". The term social model of disability was first used by a British sociologist and disability rights activist, Mike Oliver in 1983. The social model of disability is a type of theoretical model that seeks to explain the circumstances of persons with disabilities compared to the medical model of disability. The medical model of disability sees a person's disability as something that needs to be treated or prevented. The social model of disability explains that the oppression, exclusion, and discrimination people with impairments face is not an inevitable consequence of having an impairment but is caused instead by the way society is run and organized (London, 2015). The PwDs are quote on quote 'disabled' by certain barriers that are imposed on them by our modern society, these barriers caused the exclusion and discrimination of the PwDs. These barriers are divided into three, attitudinal barriers, physical barriers, and communication barriers. The attitudinal barriers are barriers borne from social and cultural prejudice and assertions about persons with disabilities that is used to justify society's discrimination of persons with disabilities. The physical barriers refer to actual human made barriers that are not accommodating to PwDs which includes steps, narrow corridors and doorways, kerbs, inaccessible toilets, inaccessible housing, poor lighting, poor seating, broken lifts, or poorly managed streets. The communication barriers refer to barriers that prevent the PwDs from properly conveying their thoughts and opinions to other people includes lack of sign language interpreters, lack of provisions for hearing induction loop technology or lack of information in accessible formats such as braille writings or Easy Read.

The evidence for the effect of these barriers can be clearly seen from the literature reviews that this paper has consulted, especially in terms of the attitudinal barriers. For example, in study about overcoming unemployment issues among PwDs, we can see the presence of the attitudinal barriers with how the PwDs were faced with prejudicial perception of their abilities in the workplace while the PwDs's lack of self-esteem are due to the condescending attitude of the people without disabilities sharing the same workspace (Halid et al 2020). In fact, attitudinal barriers play the biggest factor in influencing the rate of unemployment of PwDs.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a purposive sampling technique. The research was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The target population that is involved in this research area are 6 individuals between 25 to 35 years old, from multitude types of disabilities such as, physical, visual, mental and multiple disabilities. Some of these participants are already employed and some of them are still unemployed. These participants were recruited through Twitter and Whatsapp. This study will be conducted using qualitative research as is it the best design to be implemented in this study because it helps to understand the experiences of the persons with disabilities, as "qualitative methods are usually used when the object of study is some form of social process or meaning or experience" (Mason, 2002, p 134). The process by which this research will obtain its findings is using interviews.

The data collected through the interview transcripts will be analysed and interpreted to get the findings of the research. Firstly, the recordings of all the interviews have been transcribed in a verbatim manner. Then, each transcription will be analysed using the approach called thematic analysis. In the thematic analysis, the researchers will examine the data to identify recurring themes, whether those themes are topics, ideas and patterns that are found repeatedly.

RESULTS

CHALLENGES FACED BY PwDs IN EMPLOYMENT

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

This study found that one of challenges on their unemployment/unemployment during this COVID-19 pandemic is mental health. Three (3) participants that had been interviewed mentioned mental health when we discussed the challenges. Mental health indeed was a really serious issue that deserved more attention as it could leave a deep scar on one's emotions and lead them to commit suicide.

SS, 25 years old, female said,

"I have to force myself to set the job and love the job and do I don't like it. I went through a depressed mood for quite some time before I started a new job."

Failure to maintain financial stability may trigger a downward spiral resulting in diminished health both physical and mental. Swift et. al, (2014) highlighted that people with a disability are, on average, more anxious than people without a disability.

KV, 27 years old, male, said that:

"It makes me more anxious, and it makes me more careful to meet new people and always time my duration before and after I meet people or have any meeting or any event and also change my lifestyle."

The health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic are taking a toll on the mental health of the population, and there is already evidence of increasing demand for mental health and psychosocial support, including for PwDs.

Ali, 26 years old, male, said :

“So itulah masa tu tak boleh kerja, tak boleh jumpa orang, tak boleh... nak pergi kedai pun kena fikir dua tiga kali. So its really taking a toll on my mental health.. betul-betul terjejas lah.. so bila masuk , bila saya di panggil balik untuk bekerja tu rasa macam agak sedikit berbeza la, sebab student dah tak ramai, lepas tu staf pun dah tak ramai tinggal

One (1) of the participants mentioned to commit suicide during the unemployment phase. This posits the likelihood that due to the financial hardship that they need to face for being unemployed, there is a relation and interconnection between being unemployed with suicide (Blakely et al, 2003).

Ali, 26 years old, male said that,

“Haaa... sebenarnya Covid-19 ni really effect on me a lot. Pada bulan pertama kita kena pkk lockdown .. semua orang kena duduk rumah masa tu... So bila tak dapat keluar rumah, tak dapat pergi kerja, tak dapat jumpa doctor tak dapat buat appointment. Its really effect my personal health lah.. punya la tahap tu dah paling tinggi sampai ada once satu time tu I was thought thinking of suicide”

JOB LOSS

As the Covid-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020, most of the countries in this world were launched into an economic recession leading to millions of job losses. For persons with disabilities, the pandemic presents new obstacles especially in terms of securing and maintaining employment.

Ali, 26 years old, male said that:

“Sebenarnya dah diterangkan dah dalam termination notice tu secara detail, tetapi boss terangkan dengan lebih lanjut lah kenapa. Pada mulanya saya macam tak sedar yang saya akan diberhentikan. Masa tu saya kerja dari rumah memang boss suruh kerja dari rumah and one day saya dapat panggilan daripada boss kata suruh saya datang pejabat. Ingatkan suruh masuk balik bekerja, rupanya dia suruh saya kemas pejabat”

BARRIERS

The informant considers the difficulty of access to the worksite as a concern for the employability of PwDs and overall, the majority of the respondents consider communication barriers, social attitudes, discrimination, harassment at workplace and lack of information to significant barriers to employability of PWD (Ramachandra et al, 2017). One of the participants, HFZ, 35 years old, mentioned communication barriers.

“I am deaf and can't walk. I am using a wheelchair. I communicate in Sign Language. eg. American Sign Language and Malaysian Sign Language; including writing”

ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES

Accessibility is still such a common problem.

KV 27 years old, male said that:

“Yeah, I mean, like for example design I mean also my suggested although it's readable by screen reader but a lot more can be done to make it more accessible from I mean probably state this now compared to its state now and also the scanning process which is and with need cited with which require cited assistance it's something that is robbing independence away and also the uh the unfriendly the the UM”.

Persons with disabilities, however, can experience these difficulties on a more frequent basis and find that these challenges have much greater short and long-term impact. Lack of accessibility can create a long-term impact on persons with disabilities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT AND NGOS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES OF PWDS IN THE EMPLOYMENT SECTOR

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

One of the participants experienced resignation during this Pandemic Covid-19 and he asked for better accommodations especially for the PwDs.

SS, 25 years old, female, said that:

“So, it should be, should be something that the government should think more wisely and if you really take staffs of persons with disabilities, so again, I've been working in both sectors, privates and also in government sector, so in private sector, I believe they really looking forward for profit, they, at first they tried to you know, accommodate me as they could but then since, why I don't know why, so they cannot, they can accommodate me, they asked me to tender resignation.”

RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

All rights, including civil and political rights, require social and community interventions and responses.

Ali, 26 years old, male said that:

“For me kerajaan perlu ubah approach dalam memperkasakan golongan OKU dalam pekerjaan. Sebab approach kerajaan sekarang macam tak berapa sesuai. Sebab sekarang kita dah menuju dunia lebih maju. So kerajaan kena tukar approach untuk golongan OKU terutama dalam aspek pekerjaan. Dan menjaga kebajikan golongan OKU. Sebab kerajaan sekarang ni dia gunakan welfare-based approach so, apa yang kerajaan berikan sekadar jaga kebajikan “welfare”. Kalau kita tukar Right-based approach saya rasa kebajikan dan hak golongan OKU dalam soal pekerjaan lebih terbela. Memang itu hak mereka.”

KV, 27 years old, male said:

“Well, it's not welfare, it's rights. So, welfare means that we are still seeing people with impairment as something to be looked after. But I think what we are really trying to say here is everyone needs to be independent, and everyone needs to have their life in dignity. And from that they do not need welfare, they need their rights”.

There is a need to improve and remove the multiple barriers to access in society that are considered as a key requirement for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. MGO, 25 years old, male said that:

“memang I particular pasal accessibility dan facility. Masa interview tu boss dah mula pandang aku atas bawah atas bawah tanya “kau nie oke ke OKU wheelchair”, masa tu aku belum ada lagi step-step aku untuk cari tempat kerja. So I redah jer, bila aku masuk office aku fikir, facility takde, tandas kecil. Kerajaan kena tengok dari segi kemudahan yang ada untuk tolong OKU, macam mana nak sampai ke situ.”

As for now there is a need to make a preliminary move to recognize civil, political, economic and social rights of PWDs through a right-based approach. More engagement and advocacy on issues relating to PWDs in changing negative stigma on them are needed.

IMPROVE POLICY RELATED TO PwDs

Employment has been identified as a vital need for persons with disabilities. Significantly, the employer is identified as a major stakeholder in discussing employment among persons with disabilities (Ju, Roberts, & Zhang, 2013).

SS, 25 years old, female said that:

“if you give us the opportunity to study to get a proper education in the university, why we are not included in the employment sectors, for instance, right. So yeah, they need to have a proper discussions and proper policies regarding to hire a person with disabilities because there's a lot of things that need to be looked into and the best of it, the government should impose disability training as compulsory to students to employers, so that they will understand what these persons with disabilities then only they can help us to go through the life peoples out there, okay.”

One (1) participant also said that Malaysia has no strategic planning for PwD to ensure the implementation of the policies is going well.

Ali, 26 years old, male said that:

“Okay, sebelum ni diawal perbualan tadi kita ada cerita pasal Dasar 1 peratus. Mungkin for those yang tak tahu saya terangkan sedikit. Dasar ini adalah dasar yang diperkenalkan oleh kerajaan akhir 1990-an atau awal tahun 2000, mereka nak menggalakan 1% daripada government workforce adalah golongan OKU. Tapi setakat 2021 dan nak masuk 2022 ni, hanya sekitar 0.33% sahaja golongan OKU yang diambil kerja dari sektor kerajaan.. Dan dalam sektor swasta pula, kerajaan memperkenalkan insentif tax exemption yang ambil golongan OKU. Sehingga sekarang saya tak nampak mana-mana company yang haa.. cuba untuk ambil inisiatif tersebut.”

H said that:

“I am very critical on that regard; I do believe that the government should do more to actually deliver on their promise. I mean, this is something that I've always been critical of the government whereby they talk about helping do is with regards to employment. That is, it's very much all parts. So in terms say kalau I ambil contoh policies 1% peratus pekerjaan di sector awam, is been there

for more than 10 years until now because I did a study on that. In fact, I did also a study to see bila OKU graduate daripada university tak kisah la which level is it degree ke, master ke, I measure how much they earn and whether they are employed or not employed within six-to-six months to one year...whereby more than 60% are not employed, even if they were to be employed more than 50% in less than 2000 somewhere in the range of 1000 2000”

Ali, 26 years old, male, said that:

“Kalau dari segi polisi implementation saya rasa haa majikan dah boleh enact Malaysian anti- discrimination policies dalam company. Sebab sebelum ni saya go through nak isi borang permohonan pekerjaan kena sign macam-macam notis la. Antara notis anti-sexual harassment policy haa and the.. lepas tu Occupational and Health policy. So bagi saya kenapa kita tak masukkan Anti-discrimination policy dalam surat tawaran pekerjaan. Sebab kita boleh perkenalkan anti-discrimination policy dalam pekerjaan ni. Saya rasa itu lebih baik”

The PwDs do not need sympathy, but a sincere and strong commitment to ensuring an inclusive and PwD friendly ecosystem in the country including the education aspect for the PwDs.

MGO 25 years old, male said that:

“Bagi tu bagus, tapi mana diaorang nak pergi. Kerajaan kena pentingkan menaikkan taraf Pendidikan orang OKU. Aku ada sorang kawan yang join centre tu, sebelum masuk dia memang ada diploma, lepas tu bila dia keluar Alhamdulillah dia dapat kerja. Tapi macam mana dengan OKU yang masuk centre sambil hanya ada kelayakan SPM jer. Nanti kau nak kerja, contohnya kau belajar skill menjahit atau skill bekerja kat office, nanti bila keluar kau nak kerja kat mana?”

Awareness for and about persons with disabilities contributes to combating negative stereotypes and promotes knowledge about, and respect for, their rights and dignity.

IMPROVE EMPLOYER'S DISABILITY AWARENESS

In regard to negative perception of PwD work performance, the perspectives of employers on this issue is existent (Unger, 2002).

Ali, 26 years old, male said that:

“majikan perlu berhenti fikir golongan OKU ni tak mampu untuk lakukan kerja yang , performance mereka ni setara dengan golongan yang biasa”

On top of that, continuing misconceptions among employers have made the issue remain problematic and complicated.

Ali again, 26 years old, male said that:

“Sebab majikan kena tanam mindset yang their disabilities not a is one of the factors will affect their productivity. The company must understand that some of their staff are PwDs and but then you estimate them in their disabilities. kadang-kadang mereka ni boleh buat lebih baik dari orang able. Jangan biarkan, jangan buat pekerja OKU di stigmakan hanya kerana mereka ni golongan OKU , and you thought since you OKU, I dont think you can do better work as much as the able person”.

Awareness towards the situation was very low and the possible main contributing factor was public ignorance. These could be actions that indicate the improvement level of awareness towards the employability and wellbeing of PwDs at the workplace.

SS 25 years old, male suggested that:

“So yeah, they need to have a proper discussions and proper policies regarding to hire a person with disabilities because there's a lot of things that need to be looked into and the best of it, the government should impose disability training as compulsory to students to employers”.

DISCUSSION

From the findings of this study, there are several areas that have been identified, namely challenges and suggestions. The first area is the challenges faced by PwDs whether unemployed or in the workplace during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the data that has been analysed, among the challenges faced by respondents are mental health, job loss, stigmatization, barriers and accessibility issues. The majority of respondents face similar challenges. In mental health challenges, it can be seen that the result of this research parallel with another research too. In a study concerning the progression of mental health disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is reported that numerous people are still suffering mentally as a result of the economic consequences, as well as restrictions on social activities and prolonged confinement to their homes (Wong et al, 2021). This result indicated that as the pandemic progressed, the Malaysian public became more vulnerable to depressive disorder. According to Dr Amar-Singh HSS, the Covid-19 pandemic also gave rise to a wave of mental health pandemic among PwDs, a pandemic characterized by phobias, fears, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and suicides (Amar-Singh HSS, 2022).

In addition, some of the respondents also lost their jobs due to the discrimination and the social tension brought upon by the current Covid-19 situation. The loss of this source of income and employment is very challenging for all employees and business owners, especially for the PwDs. The average increase in workers who lost their jobs is reported to increase as pandemics occur. According to unofficial government statistics, several private sector workers have lost their jobs, while nearly half of self-employed respondents have lost their jobs and more than two-thirds have only a month's worth of savings (Amanina et.al, 2020). In addition, their job loss can also be associated with stigmatization, which is one of the challenges faced by the respondents of this study in their workplace. Stigma is a sociological phenomenon or personal experience distinguished by exclusion, rejection, blame, or devaluation as a result of experiencing or reasonably anticipating an adverse social judgement on individuals or groups (Weiss & Ramakrishna, 2006). Stigma in organizations that work with PwDs, is often at the root of the discrimination, exclusion, and low status that PwDs face in all aspects of their lives in low- and middle-income countries (Rohwerder, 2018). This proves that the stigmatization experienced by the respondents as described above is something that often happens to PwDs, especially in the working sector. PwDs are treated differently as a result of stigma, and they are frequently excluded from training and education chances, employment and livelihood opportunities, health and other public services, and full participation in all aspects of society, including decision-making (Bond, 2017).

Moreover, the respondents also cite about the barriers, such as physical barriers, communicational barriers and social barriers. Many industries have suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's prohibition on mass gatherings, work-from-home policies, and virtual meetings (Wong et.al, 2021). This is more detrimental to PwDs as some of the communicational barriers will make them unable to communicate with employers or colleagues online. In addition, they also stated that working virtually made it very difficult for some of them to get information clearly.

The second area are the suggestions to the government and NGOS on addressing the issues faced by the PwDs. To address the issue of unemployment among the disabled, all of the respondents agreed that the government should revise the one percent PwDs employment policy in the public sector. Agencies and organisations as well as the government should be aware of the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation both to staff and in all aspects of service delivery and decision making especially in the workplace. Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are not a liability to the country, but rather an asset. It is possible for PwDs to be productively employed and become taxpayers if they receive appropriate training and job opportunities (Aning et.al, 2014). On the other hand, the respondents agreed that PwDs are entitled for their human rights specifically in the public sector. They are human beings as well; therefore, they deserve to be appreciated and treated equally. NGOs and educational institutions play a big role in making sure that the Malaysian society are conscious about the PwDs and their rights, since society nowadays still lack awareness regarding the PwDs. Hence, the PwDs are entitled to their rights similarly to everybody else in the country.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to determine that when it comes to the reflection of the challenges that the PwDs faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the PwDs reflect a multitude of challenges, whether they are employed or unemployed. These challenges are, the deteriorating mental health of PwDs, greater risk of job loss due to economic recession, stigmatization of the unproductiveness of PwDs, lack of accessibility of PwDs in the workplace especially for PwDs with a visual disability and mobility disability, social barriers in workplace that manifest in the form of communication barriers, discrimination, and workplace harassment. Regarding the thoughts of the PwDs on how the government and NGOs should address the welfare of PwDs in the employment sector, the PwDs in the study gave suggestions that include provision of reasonable workplace accommodation for PwDs, the adoption of the mindset of rights-based approach for any governmental and NGO level effort to assist the PwDs in employment, improve governmental policies related to treatment of PwDs and most importantly, improve the awareness of the employers regarding the conditions and lives of PwDs.

Therefore, it is desired that this research will fulfil its role in highlighting the employment/unemployment plight of the PwDs to these government policy makers, advocacy groups and private employers. It is believed that the findings of this study would further highlight upon the issue of the condition of the PwDs in Malaysia during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Future studies should establish a more detailed explanation on how these specific points came to be and to what extent they are prevalent within the PwDs community of Malaysia.

It must be noted that in this study there are certain limitations encountered in terms of data collection, specifically the participant designated as HFZ. Similarly, to the other participants in this study, the participant designated as HFZ is also a person with disability. However, unlike the other participants, HFZ possesses a verbal disability, because of this conducting an oral interview is impossible due to his inability to talk with us. Nevertheless, the interview process is still conducted with HFZ, except HFZ would answer the questions given by the interviewer by writing the answers to the question without direct interaction. This was done to give him the freedom of expression in voicing out his lived experience. The study is also limited in terms of interactivity between the interviewer and informants. This is because the study is conducted online through a video conferencing platform, specifically "Zoom". This is done due to the conditions imposed by the Movement Control Order on all Malaysians during the time of the interview, which took place in 2021.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies should establish a more detailed explanation on how these specific points came to be and to what extent they are prevalent within the PwDs community of Malaysia. To conduct such a conclusive study, it would require not only further qualitative studies on the specific points given from the previous paragraph, but also the implementation of a quantitative study over a large population sample to identify the extent of the challenges and crisis faced by PwDs as presented in the findings.

Some of the recommendation includes emphasizing the values of treating PwDs with respect and dignity as per their basic rights as human beings within the education system of Malaysia. Especially among Malaysian students at a very young age. It doesn't matter if these values were taught in a class about religion education or a class about civic education, as long as Malaysian students were taught and encouraged to embody these values at a young age. Such deep-seated values of empathy and anti-

discrimination for PwDs can only bloom by planting its seed at a very young age. From this, awareness of the plight of PwDs wouldn't simply to spread through lectures and research but through deeds and examples which gives far greater impact.

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