

BRIEF REPORTS

**CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN
WITH DISABILITIES IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies indicated a gender bias in employment opportunities between men with disabilities and women with disabilities (1,2) More men with disabilities are in the work force as compared to women with disabilities, who are either unemployed, or work part-time (3). Women with disabilities are typically viewed as dependent, passive, incompetent and unsuitable for economically productive roles (4). The objectives of this study are to examine employment and career opportunities for women with disabilities in Malaysia, in terms of the level of education and vocational training, categories of disabilities and barriers for employment. A semi-structured interview is designed to elicit qualitative data from three respondents. The findings reported here are based on a pilot study of a larger research project. The findings of this pioneer study are expected to have important economic and social implications, for reducing unemployment among women with disabilities, in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Employment of women with disabilities is a neglected area of disability studies. Studies on special needs of people with disabilities have examined dimensions of ethnicity, socio-economic status, but have ignored the issue of gender. Women with disabilities seeking employment, faced the double discrimination of gender and disability. Employers regard women with disabilities as unproductive workers who are unable to adjust to the workplace. The unsupportive attitude of employers is further enhanced by their reluctance to make the necessary accommodations to the workplace, such as installation of lifts and ramps and provision of accessible transportation and housing.

According to Stoddard (5) one-third of the population of women with disabilities live in poverty. The women are also employed in low wage jobs, or part-time work with few benefits (6). The monthly income for women with disabilities is \$1,000 per month or \$470 less than women without disabilities and \$300 less per month than men with disabilities. Married women with disabilities earn \$270 per week or \$100 less than married men with disabilities (7).

However, the gap in the workforce participation for women with disabilities and women without disabilities is narrower than the gap between men with disabilities and men without disabilities (8). The Centre for an Accessible Society (2001) provided further information on the employment and income status for both men and women with disabilities. Since 1995, the employment rate for women without disabilities is 80.06% and 33.06% for women with disabilities (9). In contrast, the rate of employment for men without disabilities is 94.96% and 36.21% for men with disabilities. The median income of women with disabilities is \$13,974, as compared to 28,518 for women without disabilities. Men with disabilities earn \$15,275, while men without disabilities earn 31,068. It is evident that unemployment is persistent among both men and women with disabilities, and both their incomes are significantly lower than that of their able-bodied co-workers.

Women with disabilities are employed at higher rates in service, managerial and professional occupations as compared to men with disabilities. Yelin (10) indicated that 1.8 million or 18.7% of the female workforce in service occupations, are women with disabilities in comparison to 1.1 million or 15.3% of men with disabilities. In managerial and professional positions, 1.6 million or 10.7% of the workforce are women with disabilities in comparison with 1.3 million or 9.2% men with disabilities. However, the overall rate of employment for women with disabilities is significantly lower than for men with disabilities. According to Bowe (11) 42% of men with disabilities are in the workforce in comparison with 24% of women with disabilities. More men with disabilities are employed full-time (30%), than women with disabilities (12%). Women with disabilities who work full-time earn 56% less pay, than men with disabilities on full-time employment.

A gender bias attitude is also reflected in training programmes for employment. Women with disabilities are rehabilitated for part-time work, or to be homemakers (12). Only 34% women participated in supported employment programmes for developmental disabilities in comparison with 66% male participation (13). In addition, 70% of men with developmental disabilities retain their jobs after 6 months, as compared to 55% of women with a similar disability.

In Malaysia, no statistics are available to distinguish the participation of men and women with disabilities, in the workforce. It is estimated that 1.0% or 210,000 of the total population of 21 million are people with disabilities (14). A total of 73,353 people with disabilities, are presently registered with the Department of Welfare Services. The Public Services Department indicated that 538 people with disabilities were employed in the public sector, in 1997. In 1998 there were 3,309 people employed in the private sector according to the Labour Department. Totally, only 5.24% of people with disabilities are employed, in Malaysia. The rate of employment for people with disabilities in Malaysia is significantly lower than their non-disabled counterparts. It is expected that the rate of employment for women with disabilities, is less than that of men with disabilities.

The purpose of this study is to examine employment opportunities and barriers experienced by women with disabilities, in Malaysia. The issues examined include gender and disability discrimination, opportunities for promotion, further training and career advancement, as well as types of accommodations available at the workplace. The findings of this study will provide preliminary data for further investigation into employment problems faced by women with disabilities, in poorer communities.

METHODOLOGY

A semi-structured interview was designed to elicit information on employment opportunities and barriers from three presently employed women. The three respondents were professional women in managerial, administrative and teaching positions. The interview consisted of two parts. Part one requires the respondent to answer questions on their job title, number of years employed, number of dependents on their income and number of co-workers with disabilities in their workplace. Part two of the interview included the following questions:

- a) What types of facilities and accommodation are provided by the employer (housing, transportation, ramps, lifts, furniture and accessibility in the building)?
- b) Is the respondent given limited work assignment because of her disability?
- c) Does the respondent have to work harder than other able-bodied co-workers because of her disability?
- d) Has the respondent been overlooked or bypassed for promotion or further studies?
- e) Are the supervisors and co-workers helpful to the respondent?
- f) Does the respondent feel comfortable asking for help at work?

Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and the respondent was instructed to terminate the interview if they did not feel comfortable with the questions. Respondents were also informed about the confidentiality of their responses. Each interview was transcribed and coded for relevant data to answer the research questions.

RESULTS

Case 1

Respondent A is a 48-year-old librarian from a local university who has spinal cord injury due to a road accident. The road accident occurred on campus when the respondent was an undergraduate. After her graduation, the university made arrangements for an administrative job for her in the main library. She is provided with ramps, accessible toilet, stair-lift as well

as a separate entrance to the workplace. She is also given a couch in a rest area to lie down and to prevent bed sores. The furniture is assembled to facilitate easy movement in the work area. She is also given a covered car park that is spacious enough for her to move from her wheelchair into her car. The respondent would like to see further improvements such as accessible toilets on every floor of the library and an automatic door installed in the main entrance.

Respondent A has no regrets about her present work "I have no regrets but if I am not disabled I might try to find work somewhere else." She does not feel any discrimination at work and describes her employer and co-workers as "compassionate and empathetic." The only concern of her employer is that she may need to take frequent medical leave. However, in the 28 years of service she has taken less than 3 weeks per year for medical treatment. In the initial years of her employment, she was only given the day shift in the library, to ensure her safety whilst travelling to work. She did not feel that she needed to work harder than her non-disabled co-workers, but felt a need "inside to prove something better, although I am disabled." Her employer appreciates her efforts and she was recently recommended for promotion. She attributes her success to her positive attitude, her friendliness towards her clients and her ability to solve problems. She has a Masters degree and attends conferences regularly. She was voted "Employee of the Year" for 2001, and is considered a contributing member of the university.

Respondent A regards her co-workers as helpful and they accept her as a professional. In the first year of her employment, her co-workers were afraid to talk to her for fear "of asking the wrong questions." But now they help to put her wheelchair in her car, keep the fire door open and help take books from the higher shelves. She would like to advise other women with disabilities to keep looking for employment even though they have been rejected by potential employers. If given the opportunity, they "must prove themselves, give more than they can, have dedication, dignity, self-worth and have initiative." A major barrier for women with disabilities is overcoming lack of self-confidence. Her advice can be summed up as "have no fear, be adventurous, ask for the job and always believe you can do it."

Case 2

Respondent B became disabled at the age of 8 months because of polio. She is presently working as a remiser with a local stock broking firm. She lives with her family, drives to work and occasionally supports her mother financially. Respondent B feels very fortunate that her company takes the initiative to determine her needs at the workplace. Within her office structure she is given a special room with a gradient ramp, an automatic door and accessible toilets on every floor. She is very comfortable at work because she is given adjustable furniture and ample space to manoeuvre her wheelchair. She is given a larger car

park reserved for company directors in the building. Respondent B also indicated that she approached the building management to express her needs for facilities and accommodation. The ramp which was unsuitably constructed, was later modified to an appropriate gradient.

Respondent B's job requires her to meet and socialise with clients. She is not given limited work assignments because it is her primary responsibility to increase her income by increasing her clientele. She finds difficulty in securing clients from bigger corporations because her mobility problems limit her socialising to the cafeteria in the building. Restaurants located in luxury hotels are often not accessible for wheelchairs. She felt that her income could increase if "the outside world is more accessible." She describes her various clients as "some don't care if I am disabled but are friendly. Others feel discomfort and dare not recommend me to their friends." She has a "good reputation" with her clients and she has to prove her capability to them even though at times, it is inconvenient for her. An example she gave is, when she has to bank in a cheque in a building with no ramps or lifts.

Respondent B's present job does not involve a promotion, but more on-the-job training for licensing points. Her company provided her with the necessary training with the Securities Commission. She has not faced any discrimination in her present employment and is considering "staying on because the staff and management is good to me." Respondent B did relate her previous job seeking experience. A company employer wanted to hire her after hearing her qualification over the phone, but denied her an interview when he discovered her disability. She regarded the company's rejection as blatant discrimination, but persevered to look for other jobs. When she was interviewed for the present job her potential employer made no reference to her disability.

Respondent B attributes her success to the positive attitude of her company as well as her very supportive and helpful supervisor. Her supervisor and co-workers are helpful and she is not uncomfortable asking them for help. Examples of help that she requires, would be asking co-workers to manage her clients while she is on leave, search for files on high shelves and buy her favourite food in a non-accessible location. She would like to advance her career by securing a larger network of high investment clients.

Respondent B's advice to women with disabilities looking for employment is, "be proactive, be aware of your work rights, be confident, do not leave everything to fate and lose hope." She finds it necessary to have negotiating skills to request the management for necessary facilities and accommodations. Employers should not be overly concerned with the amount of medical leave taken yearly, because most people with disabilities do not require frequent medical attention.

Case 3

Respondent C has worked as a lecturer in Sports Psychology in a local public university, for the last 4 years. She is in her 30's and has a spinal cord injury due to a benign growth in the spinal column, diagnosed 12 years ago. She is self-supportive, lives with a friend and together with her siblings supports her mother financially. Respondent C's office is located in a partially accessible building. There is no lift and the ramp provided has a steep gradient unsuitable for wheelchair users, with limited upper body strength. She has to share accessible toilets with the students, since no accessible toilet is provided for the staff. No accessible showers are available in the building. The main entrance is inconvenient for Respondent C if it is locked on one side. She is able to move freely in the larger office but a sofa is not provided for her to take rest. She is eligible for staff housing, but did not apply because none of the buildings are accessible. She is driven to work by a friend and does not require a parking space.

Throughout the interview, Respondent C expressed her dissatisfaction with the gender and disability discrimination she faced from her supervisor. He is described as "unapproachable, favours work given to other men and would spend money to repair the porch but ignored the necessity of a suitable ramp." Her work assignments are limited to teaching and administrative responsibilities are shared among the male faculty members. When she received an achievement award given by the university, her employer did not give her recognition by sending a congratulatory note.

Her employer is described as, "lacks understanding about disability." He is also "condescending towards women." It took Respondent C 3 years to be confirmed for sabbatical leave but not for promotion. Her employer also did not allow her to teach final year courses. In contrast, her co-workers are "fine and I have a good relationship with them." She works very hard and loves teaching. She enjoys her close relationship with her students and her daily tennis games. She would have been a national netball player if she were not disabled. Her sports activities have been reduced due to her disability. She attributes her success to the collective encouragement from family and friends.. In addition, there is a lack of facilities for recreation for people with disabilities and mobility associated problems, in available facilities.

Respondent C is career oriented and would like to pursue her doctorate in Sports Psychology abroad, as well as be a certified Sports Psychologist. She advised other women with disabilities seeking jobs, to "not accept any job just because you need a job." Women should train themselves for the job they want, be confident during interviews, be firm and communicate their needs convincingly. They need to know their work rights, as well as government initiatives for hiring people with disabilities. Her final words speak for themselves, "be bold, be strong."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings reported in this paper are based on interviews of three employed women with disabilities. The women are gainfully employed because of their tertiary education and their positive self-image. The first respondent was given her present appointment because the accident that resulted in her disability, occurred on campus. The second respondent had her share of job rejections and experience taught her to demand for her work rights. The third respondent is still trying to overcome physical barriers at her workplace and at the same time, she has to deal with an unsupportive supervisor. All three cases provide useful insights into the employment history of women with disabilities in Malaysia. However, a more in-depth study is required to gather information on employment opportunities for women with disabilities in more marginalised situations such as those who are poor, uneducated, dependent on governmental welfare programmes and living in rural communities.

Employment means social equality and social freedom. Participation and access to employment is not a privilege but a basic right for women with disabilities. Employment for women with disabilities is important for three main reasons: (a) for economic independence and successful living, (b) for a sense of self-worth, dignity, and contribution to society, and (c) for integration into the mainstream non-disabled community.

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