Journal of Media Horizons
ISSN: 2710-4060 2710-4052 Volume 6, Issue 1, 2025

BARRIERS TO INCLUSION: THE STRUGGLES OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN PAKISTAN

Farman Ali[1], Umar Daraz[2], Imtiaz Ahmad[3], Zakir Hussian[4], Adnan Khan[*5]

[1]*Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand*
[2]*Lecturer, Department of Sociology University of Malakand*
[3]*Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Malakand*
[4]*Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand*
[5]*Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand*

[1]farman.ali@uom.edu.pk [*5]akhan@uom.edu.pk

DOI: http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19755375

Keywords
Women with disabilities, Physical barrier, Discrimination, (Un)employment, Inclusion

Article History
Received on 25 January 2025
Accepted on 25 February 2025
Published on 05 March 2025

Copyright @Author
Corresponding Author: *

Abstract
This study examines (un)employment challenges and discrimination experienced by women with disabilities. The study uses interviews and FGDs to elucidate multifaceted challenges related to the (un)employment of women with disabilities. The findings show that in patriarchal and ableist social structure, disabled women experience extreme economic hardships, exacerbated by discriminatory attitudes from colleagues and supervisors. In addition to these challenges, their impairments also influence job performance and career prospects, resulting in reduced social standing, lower self-perception and lower quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

Women with disabilities experience multifaceted challenges in the peripheries of the global South. A sizable number of disabled people live in the developing world. Countries with limited resources however, often struggle to meet the needs of disabled individuals. In the developing world, disability and poverty are deeply interrelated. Poverty produces disability and disability reinforces poverty, as acknowledged by recent scholarship (e.g., Grech, 2016). Women with disabilities face gender-based challenges that further exacerbate their vulnerability. Poverty creates additional hardships for them that affect their socio-economic status compared to non-disabled women and male counterparts. Consequently, women with disabilities have little influence in economic decision-making. In addition, exclusion from the labor market affects women with disabilities, including their decision-making capacity, quality of life and personal development. The challenges faced by women with disabilities in the global South received little attention; therefore, their voices largely remain unheard. In the context of Pakistan, disabled women remain underrepresented in the existing literature focusing on the intersection of gender and disability.

Moreover, the dynamics of this intersection in Pakistan's broader socio-cultural framework, particularly in the Pashtun cultural context, remain largely unexplored. Studies conducted in different and diverse cultural settings show how disability limits access to employment opportunities and compels women with disabilities into dependency and disempowerment (e.g., Chindimba, n.d.). Similarly, gender-based roles and societal assumptions further marginalize women with disabilities and limit their economic, social, and political participation and development (Arnade & Haefner, 2006). Consequently, the intersection of disability and gender has implications for the empowerment and inclusion of women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities constitute a heterogeneous group. This heterogeneity includes the types of disabilities, age, socio-economic status and cultural background. Recognizing this diversity is essential to address their economic needs (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2008). Therefore, in the welfare discourse and service provision, intersectional issues are important for achieving meaningful outcomes through customized support services. Addressing their needs through an intersectional framework can help mitigate the challenges they face in receiving the necessary skills for labor market participation.

Women with disabilities experience systemic exclusion from the labor market owing to multiple barriers. These barriers include limited access to education and skills development, negative attitudes and inaccessible physical environment. As a result, they are more likely to experience economic exclusion and dependency (International Labor Office, 2006). In this regard, the economic contributions, dignity and socio-economic conditions of women with disabilities have been undervalued (Ngwena, 2007). Furthermore, in developing countries, a significant proportion of this population remains marginalized (DFID, 2008). Moreover, poverty is reinforced by other structural barriers such as inaccessible built environment, limited educational opportunities and limited access to labour market. In addition, women with disabilities encounter challenges in securing and retaining jobs due to their impairments and the power dynamics of ableist world. In this regard, Baldwin and Johnson (1998) argue that employment discrimination manifests in various ways, including refusal by employers and termination following absences due to illness or injury.

Disability in general, and issues of women with disabilities in particular, have received little attention in Pakistan. Existing literature on disability and employability largely fails to capture the lived experiences of Pakistani women with disabilities in relation to their (un)employment issues. While gender plays an important role in empowerment and marginalization, its intersection with disability remains inadequately addressed. Therefore, this study is an attempt to understand the economic challenges faced by women with disabilities, and the discussion of the study contributes to a more inclusive discourse.

Methodology

Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. Fifteen participants from nine Union Councils of District Swat were recruited for data collection. Focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews, helped us understand the issue and comprehensive exploration of participants' perspectives.

Data was collected from participants with mobility disabilities. Participants were identified and recruited through snowball sampling. The following section discusses the themes, results, and discussion of the study's key findings.

Discrimination in the Workplace

Workplace discrimination affects professional experiences, job performance and job retention of

women with disabilities. In practice, gender inequalities embedded in social structures intersect with systemic disadvantages, result in exclusion and marginalization (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2008). These interrelated barriers not only limit access to employment opportunities but also create a hostile environment in the workplace that affects their professional growth and financial independence.

Participants of the study shared their experiences and the challenges they faced in (un)employment. Their narratives reflect a resistance against patriarchy and hegemony of able-bodied people. Being employees of a vocational center, Shumaila and Nosheen encountered patriarchal and ableist challenges, including mobility barriers in the workplace and discrimination from employers and colleagues. Nosheen, commented on the workplace discrimination and discussed how her manager exploited her disability by paying her lower salary than her non-disabled counterparts. Her experience is an example of systemic discrimination based on the impairment of disabled people (Gardiner, 1997). Many disabled employees cannot fully illustrate their skills and potential due to working in environment of fear and rejection, perpetuated by discriminatory attitudes of able-bodied coworkers and employers.

Disability studies literature demonstrates the structural exclusion of women with disabilities. The status of being disabled affects labour market participation of those with disabilities and therefore reinforces marginalization and economic dependency (Fawcett, 1996). Income and employment are however important prerequisites of social inclusion for disabled women that enable them to navigate the demands of the modern world. In this regard, Abberley (1999) argues that achieving equal citizenship is contingent upon access to education and employment. For Abberley, proper education and vocational training play a crucial role in skill development which enhances employment prospects of disabled people.

Discrimination in the workplace shows a fundamental challenge to the empowerment of women with disabilities (Dupper & Garbers, 2004). These systemic issues necessitate urgent policy measures and institutional reforms to facilitate inclusive working environment that promotes equal opportunities and economic freedom for women with disabilities.

The findings illustrate the systemic discrimination and inequalities women with disabilities face in their workplaces. For instance, Nosheen, recalled the discrimination in her workplace, as she commented:

[D]uring my job interview, I was offered a salary of 7,000 per month and I accepted. Upon joining the center, my coworkers informed me that they were earning 12,000 per month for the same work. If I were not in urgent need of supporting my family, I would have left. Although I earn money, I face many challenges. Mobility is a significant issue for me because of the steps inside the workplace. My boss threatens me, saying that if I am unable to work, I should leave, despite the fact that I am already being paid less than my coworkers.

The experience of Nosheen shows the multifarious barriers experienced by women with disabilities, including physical inaccessibility, wage disparities, employment instability, and insecurity. Her situation also illustrates the confluence of workplace exploitation and ableism. Ableist practices in the workplace produce further marginalization that affects Nosheen, her mental health and her performance. These evidences reminds the policymakers of the need for policy measures that facilitate disabled friendly workplaces and provide legal protection for individuals like Nosheen and other women with disabilities against employment discrimination.

Another participant of the study shared her experience of workplace discrimination and stated that despite performing her job just like her workers, she was forced to resign. The manager and coworkers exhibited lack of acceptance toward women with physical disabilities, driven by deeply embedded negative stereotypes. Consequently, disabled women were subjected to exclusion and discrimination by their able-bodied colleagues. Such discriminatory practices have far reaching impact and consequences for the dignity and worth of women with disabilities. Their rights are violated, compelling them to work in an oppressive environment that undermines their professional and personal well-being.

In this regard, Shumaila, the second participant employed at a vocational center, commented that:

I got a job at a female vocational center, and I was working very hard, but the management was not happy. This was my first experience working with non-disabled female employees. I felt very shy and nervous while working with them. Soon, I realized that their behavior was very negative, and it discouraged me. They told me that I was creating problems for the other female workers.

The case of Shumaila reflects the stereotypical attitudes toward the abilities of women with disabilities in the job and labor market. Consequently, such situations push them into a vicious cycle of poverty and other serious socio-economic challenges. The majority of the study's participants were unemployed, primarily due to a confluence of factors, including their impairment, patriarchy, discriminatory attitudes, inaccessible environment, and lack of skills. The Pashtun gender order encourages women's responsibilities in the private sphere while discouraging their involvement in public spheres.

Furthermore, co-workers and employers exhibited bias against female employees with disabilities. Participants in the study also experienced body shaming from non-disabled individuals, which negatively affected their performance and led to stress. For women with disabilities, body shaming serves as a form of categorization in which their so-called unacceptable and inferior characteristics are highlighted. Consequently, their exclusion from society is legitimized. Furthermore, this phenomenon does not reflect achievement, competence, or ability but rather reinforces their perceived inferior status in relation to their non-disabled counterparts (Boglieri & Shapiro, 2012), ultimately affecting their professional performance.

Therefore, names such as "handicapped," "disabled," "epileptics," "blind" and "spastics" are used to categorize individuals with disabilities that underestimated their original identity. Additionally, some individuals are perceived as having a "spoiled identity," meaning that society not only attributes a negative characteristic to them but also regards them as deviant (Goffman, 1963). As a result, these imposed characteristics become defining aspects of their social identity. Negative labeling leads to a stigmatized identity, preventing women with disabilities from engaging in meaningful experiences. Participants believed that they felt a loss of identity due to the devalued names assigned to them by able-bodied people.

Many became victims of psychosocial distress due to being referred to by offensive terms such as "Gwada Khanzera" (amputee pig), "Shala" (leg amputee), and "Pa ta k yaw rag sewa de" (you have an extra wicked skill). This devaluation causes psychological distress, exacerbates their experience of exclusion and affects their overall performance.

Impairment and Physical Barriers

In addition to gender roles and patriarchal norms, the effects of impairment further complicate the employment opportunities of women with disabilities. During one of the focus group discussions, a participant, Zartaja, shared that although she did not face restrictions from her family, the physical effects of her impairment prevented her from securing a job. She experienced chronic pain while moving, which ultimately left her unemployed. "in this condition [paraplegic], when I try to cover a long distance, my leg starts to hurt, and then I cannot move further," Zartaja, said.

Zartaja's experience reflects how the impairment effects impact her routine life, preventing her from seeking employment. This indicates that exclusion from the labor market is not only caused by patriarchy but also of impairment effects that hinder labour market participation.

Impairment related challenges exacerbate participants experiences. The confluence of impairment and poverty has implications for disabled individuals, creating challenges at personal level and in the broader societal structures of ableism and disablism. Barriers such as poverty, physical inaccessibility, traditional gender roles, lack of skills and education, and unemployment are critical factors in understanding the lived realities of women with disabilities in remote regions. Despite their unique disability experiences, these issues have received little attention in disability research scholarship.

The physical barriers also affect the employment of women with disabilities, and limit their participation in the labor market compared to their male counterparts. Many participants in this study

reported that inaccessible physical environment hindered their ability to seek and maintain employment. Gul, one of the participants, shared her experience:

I am a wheelchair user, and I cannot get around on such uneven streets and buildings. I need a job to support my family. If I set out for anything from home, I face severe difficulties because the local transport, such as auto-rickshaw, does not have space for my wheelchair. It is difficult to go outside of the home."

An accessible built environment requires awareness and resources at the state level. Unfortunately, in the majority of colonized countries, both of these essential prerequisites are lacking. Pakistan faces enormous economic crises and lacks the necessary resources to address the problem of inaccessibility. Additionally, there is little to no public awareness regarding the importance of accessibility and the inclusion of disabled people in various spheres of life. This means that a large number of disabled individuals remain excluded, violating their fundamental rights.

The effects of impairment in an inaccessible physical environment are significant concerns for disabled people in Pakistan. The government's lack of resources further exacerbates the challenges faced by women with disabilities. This issue is particularly critical in developing countries, including Pakistan, where a sizable population of disabled individuals experiences social exclusion with limited or no support from the government.

Challenges in Self-Employment

Women with disabilities have fewer chances to receive vocational training or participate in programs that could enhance their skills and improve their chances of employment. Consequently, they earn less than their non-disabled female and male counterparts. Moreover, self-employment depends on skills, confidence, and motivation from peer groups and family members. However, women with disabilities lack these prerequisites, making them financially dependent on their families. In Pashtun communities, women are discouraged from working in the public sphere. However, they can engage in home-based work including sewing, knitting, and embroidery. Although participants had the necessary skills, they lacked the required equipment to start or continue their work, which affected their ability to earn an income. As Sara stated:

I used a machine to sew clothes, and the women in our neighborhood would bring clothes for stitching. However, six months ago, my sewing machine broke down, and no one in my family is willing to take it for repairs. My income has stopped, and that creates economic problems for me.

Living in an ableist society, women with disabilities struggle to meet even their most basic needs, including access to equipment essential for earning a dignified and independent livelihood. Access to equipment could enhance the skills and could help maintaining their dignity. Rahila, in one of the focus group discussions, also shared a similar experience:

For females, outdoor business is not possible in Swat. Therefore, I managed to start my own small business. It is generating a reasonable income, but I do not have a quality sewing machine like professional tailors. It takes me two to three days to sew a single outfit.

Furthermore, several participants commented lack of training and skills exacerbated their economic difficulties.

They urged the importance of vocational skills for disabled women in generating income. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Rioux, 1985) which demonstrate how limited training and poor education negatively affect the employability of women with disabilities, and increasing their vulnerability.

Physical barriers also limit their chance to learn vocational skills. For wheelchair users, accessing vocational centers is a challenging task.These training centers are not easily available in every village or administrative unit in Pakistan. Only a few centers operate to serve the needs of a large populations , and they serve large populations spread across remote areas. These challenges significantly impact the lives of women with disabilities. Consequently, they become passive and dependent in an ableist and patriarchal society.

Conclusion

Disabled people face multifaceted challenges in the developing world due to the confluence of poverty, gender roles, colonial legacies, and geopolitical

factors. Women with disabilities are marginalized at this intersection, leaving them unheard voices of the global South. Their gender places them at risk of exploitation, discrimination, dependency and economic and social exclusion. In addition, impairment effects and physical barriers exacerbate these challenges, leading to low social status, low self-esteem, and lower standard of living. Gender segregation and patriarchal social structure in Pashtun society are the main factors that limit the employment of women with disabilities. Exclusion from the job market not only affects their economic freedom but also affects their personal well-being. Those who manage to secure employment, face discrimination and accessibility barriers.

The empirical evidence of this study reflects the importance of the urgent need for measures to address unemployment among women with disabilities and to promote income generating opportunities. sensitization of communities about the importance of employment for women with disabilities and its positive societal impact is crucial in this regard. Creating opportunities for employment will facilitate their social and economic inclusion and therefore will contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

REFERENCES

Abberley, P. (1999). *The significance of work for the citizenship of disabled people*. University College Dublin: Disability Archive UK.

Arnade, S. and Haefner, S. (2006) *Gendering the Draft Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities.* Legal background paper.Published by Disabled Peoples International (DPI), Berlin.

Baglieri, S., and Shapiro, A. (2012). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for creating least restrictive attitudes.* Routledge, UK.

Baldwin, M.L., and Johnson, W.G. (1998). *Dispelling the myths about work disability, in new approaches to disability in the workplace*, edited by T. Thomason, J.F. Burton and D.E. Hyatt.Madison: Industrial Relations Research Association.

Chindimba, A. (ND). *The place of women with disabilities in feminist movements.*

Department for International Development (DFID), (2008). Data: Annex 4: *statistics on public special schools in Ghana.*

Dupper, D. C., and Garbers, C. (2004).*Affirmative action, in essential employment discrimination law,* edited by E. Strydom. Landsdowne: Juta Law.

Fawcett, G. (1996). *Living with disability in Canada: An economic portrait*.Human resources development Canada, office for disability Issues, Ottawa.

Gardiner, J. (1997). *The disability discrimination Act 1995- putting the law into practice*. London: The Industrial Society.

Grech, S. (2016). Disability and poverty: Complex interactions and critical reframings. *Disability in the global South: The critical handbook*, 217-235

International Labor Office.(2006). *Tripartite consultations about the employment of people with disabilities- a human rights issue*. Geneva: ILO Publications.

National Women's Council of Ireland.(2008). *Disability and women in Ireland 'building solidarity and inclusion'.*

Ngwena, C. (2007). Deconstructing the definition of disability under the employment equity act: legal deconstruction.*South African Journal of Human Rights, 3*(23), 116-156.

Rioux, M. (1985). Labeled disabled and wanting to work. In R. Abella (Ed.), *Research studies of the Royal Commission on Equality in Employment* (pp. 613–639). Ottawa, Canada: Supply and Services.