

**UNSEEN CHALLENGES, UNHEARD VOICES, UNSPOKEN DESIRES:  
EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYMENT BY MALAYSIANS WITH  
PHYSICAL DISABILITIES**

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*As Malaysia continues her trajectory to be a developed nation, the right towards equitable employment opportunity for Malaysians with disabilities has come to the fore. This article aims to assimilate the experiences regarding employment from Malaysian employees with physical disabilities. The novelty of this article is in making known their "unseen challenges, unheard voices and unspoken desires" regarding employment so that a pragmatic policy response can be formulated. Significantly, this article highlights that it is Malaysia's disabling environment and workplace barriers that impede Malaysians with physical disabilities from progressing in the world of work. This study involves 287 Malaysians with physical disabilities. The time has come for Malaysians with physical disabilities to earn their lawful right to equitable employment and to enjoy a better quality of life. Any further delay in achieving these aspirations reflects the lack of political will and absence of public commitment to include and integrate them into mainstream society.*

Keywords: physical disability, Malaysia, equitable employment opportunity, human rights

**INTRODUCTION**

As Malaysia continues her trajectory to become a developed nation, critical issues such as employability of people with disabilities have come to the fore (Jayasooria, Krishnan and Ooi, 1997). No nation can claim to be totally developed if unequal employment opportunities still persist amongst minority groups, in this case, people with disabilities. In turn, this will perpetuate the cycle of poverty and eliminate their hopes and entitlements towards a better quality of life. People with disabilities should not be regarded as "unproductive" and excluded from a nation's wider economy. Instead, they should be given equal employment opportunity as productive human capital that can be drawn upon to accelerate a nation's growth. The fact that people with disabilities total 600

million people worldwide tell us that their sizeable presence in the global economy cannot go unnoticed (International Labour Office [ILO], n.d.).

From a global perspective, the rights of people with disabilities to employment have recently become a widely debated topic. A paradigm shift from a "charity" approach to a "human rights" approach has redefined the meaning of being afflicted with a disability. This shift has renegotiated their entitlements and opportunities so that they can become self-reliant to thrive and survive in a globalised world. In advanced economies, a burgeoning body of literature has emerged championing non-discrimination laws for people with disabilities (ILO, 2006). These laws advocate that all groups, inclusive of people with disabilities, are humans and should be afforded equal and universal human rights (ILO, 2006: 19; Cornell University ILR School, 1993; Jayasooria, 2000). With these rights, people with disabilities should no longer be discriminated against, marginalised or socially excluded from the workforce. People with disabilities should have equal rights to employment and subsequently, equitable opportunities towards training and development so that they can be a part of any nation's growth and economic development.

Within this context, this article aims to explore and understand the experiences of employment by people with physical disabilities in the Northern States (Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak) of Peninsular Malaysia. Much research has been undertaken to debate and advocate better policies for people with disabilities (ILO, 2006; Perry, 2009; Cornell University ILR School, 1993), to offer perspectives and attitudes of employers about the employment of people with disabilities (Mansour, 2009) and to provide opinions of social advocates on disabled issues/rights (Jayasooria, 1999; 2000). However, to date, no research has been undertaken on the experience that people with disabilities, specifically those with physical disabilities, have towards employment. Thus, this article aims to fill this gap by discussing in-depth the key issues and challenges that people with disabilities face and by assimilating their experiences with employment. Significantly, the novelty of this article lies in revealing the unseen challenges, making heard the unheard voices and making known the unspoken desires of people with physical disabilities towards employment.

This article is divided into five sections. The section after the introduction reviews the relevant literature on people with disabilities and employment in Malaysia and globally. Section three briefly explains the methodology for this study, and the findings of this study are discussed in section four. The final section concludes this article by providing pragmatic policy implications from this study.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **People with Physical Disabilities**

The term "disability" has multi-dimensional meanings given that a wide range of disabilities (e.g., visual impairment, congenital disabilities, developmental disabilities and learning disabilities) exist within the medical taxonomy. However, in the context of this article, the focus is on people with physical disabilities. According to the Handbook of Employing Persons with Disabilities (Selangor Cheshire Home [SCH], 2009), people with physical disabilities are defined as "those who have an acquired or congenital physical and/or motor impairment; disabilities such as cerebral palsy, myelomeningocele (spine bifida), muscular dystrophy, arthritis, amputations, congenital anomalies, osteogenesis imperfect, arthrogryposis and others..." Some of the physical characteristics of people with physical disabilities include paralysis; altered muscle tone; sensory disturbances; an unsteady gait; non-ambulation requiring alternate systems of mobility; loss of, or inability to use of, one or more limbs; and poor gross, fine or oral motor control that restrict their movements one way or another (SCH, 2009: 21).

Based on statistics from Malaysia's Social Welfare Department, (unpublished data, 2010), the total number of disabled Malaysians registered with the department has increased 11.5% from 248,858 persons in 2008 to 277,509 persons in 2009. The presence of people with disabilities in the northern states is relatively high, with 73,545 persons or 26.5% of the total figures in 2009. This means that slightly more than a quarter of people with disabilities in Malaysia are concentrated in these states, which justifies the selection of Malaysia's northern States as the case study areas for this study. In terms of disability, Malaysians with physical disabilities (34.7%) register as the second highest category after those with learning disabilities (38.6%) in 2009. The percentage of Malaysians with physical disabilities increased 12.1% from 85,960 persons in 2008 to 96,358 persons in 2009. However, these figures from the Welfare Department are by no means exhaustive given that registration of people with disabilities in Malaysia is not mandatory but is done on a voluntary basis (Norani, Khalid and Nor Aishah, 2001). Thus, the accuracy of these statistics in portraying the actual population of people with disabilities in Malaysia is questionable. The actual population could be larger.

Another source for data is Malaysia's Third National Health and Morbidity Survey. According to their cross-sectional population-based study in 2006, it was reported that the overall prevalence of physical disability is at 6.3 per 1,000 population, which implies there are approximately 176,400 people with physical disabilities given Malaysia's present population of 28 million. The study also reported that physical disability increases with age and is more common amongst males than females. One out of three Malaysians with physical disability

come from households living below Malaysia's poverty line.<sup>1</sup> The study also found no significant difference with regard to ethnicity and rural-urban distribution.

However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), as a general rule of thumb, people with disabilities comprise between 5% to 10% of the population in developing countries (Khor, 2002). Hence, it can then be assumed that there should be approximately 1.4 to 2.8 million people with disabilities in Malaysia given the nation's current population of 28 million. Thus, the number of Malaysians with physical disabilities can be generalised from the above percentages totalling between 540,000 to 1.08 million, which is a substantial figure—sufficient to make a positive impact on the nation's economic development if they were gainfully employed.

The key impediment of people with physical disabilities is their difficulties in mobility even though oftentimes their other faculties (i.e., intellect, speech, sight) are still completely functional and are at times comparable to or even better than their able-bodied counterparts. In fact, it was highlighted in the Handbook for Employing Persons with Disabilities that "In general person with physical disabilities can do all kind of tasks as they have normal capabilities" (SCH, 2009: 23).

For a better understanding of physical disability, we need to examine the literature on how disability is defined. The following section discusses the two key yet opposing models of disability, namely, the Medical Model versus the Social Model.

### **Medical Model or Social Model?**

In many Western societies, the rise of the social model of disability has challenged and is gradually replacing the medical model (Roulstone, 2004). Under the medical model, an individual's deficiency and personal incapacities are perceived as the source of disability when compared to their able-bodied individuals. As such, their opportunity to secure gainful employment has been far-fetched and unthinkable. They were often treated as incapacitated beings of society with minimal or no economic function to contribute to the wider economy. In contrast, the social model views disability as a result of the disabling social, institutional and environmental barriers that impose limitations on people with disabilities instead of as a result of their own personal disabilities (Jayasooria, 1999; 2000; Roulstone, 2004; Abberley, 1999; Oliver, 1996).

According to the literature from ILO (n.d.), amongst the key barriers people with disabilities face include inaccessibility to education, training and employment; fears, stereotypes and discrimination towards people with disabilities at all strata of society; inadequate legislative/policy support to address people with disabilities rights to full participation in society and the workplace; a dearth of information with regard to people with disabilities, which caused them

to be "invisible" and forgotten; technological barriers like a shortage of access to assistive gadgets, technology and support services; "psychosocial issues" deriving from long periods of exclusion from society; and last but not least, physical barriers, such as non-disabled friendly buildings and transportation systems. As Abberley (1999) argues, "A social model of disability focuses on the fact that so-called 'normal' human activities are structured by the general social and economic environment, which is constructed by and in the interests of non-impaired people. 'Disability' is then defined as a form of oppression." This oppression is often manifested in the form of "discrimination" against people with disabilities. As we continue to live in a highly discriminatory society, people with disabilities will have to bear the brunt and stigma of being disabled (Purdie, 2009). Simply put, Barnes (1992) summarises this phenomenon saying, "to be a disabled person means to be discriminated against." In this regard, discrimination will manifest itself in various forms under different circumstances.

Clearly, this questions the notion of work in terms of how people with disabilities are integrated into the mainstream workforce amidst such discriminatory environments. Even in advanced economies where anti-discrimination laws exist in the forms of Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) (United Kingdom) and the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), the promise of these acts are restricted by its medical model underpinnings (Roulstone, 2004). Thus, to overcome their exclusion from society and to increase their accessibility and rights to employment, the way disability is perceived has to change. Ideally, the emancipation process should reinstate the rights, choices and active involvement of people with disabilities in the workforce. In Malaysia, this process can prove to be challenging because public apathy, discrimination and prejudice continue to deprive people with disabilities of their rights (Jayasooria, 2000). This situation is compounded by the "cultural differences" between Malaysia and the West in terms of how democracy is operationalised. Inevitably, such situations cause the perpetuation of discrimination on Malaysians with disabilities.

### **Disability and Employment**

Employment provides a means for survival and self-sustenance (Mansour, 2009). Being gainfully employed also elevates a person's status in society and provides them a sense of identity. However, these concepts pertaining to the importance of employment are predominantly directed to able-bodied individuals without taking into account people with disabilities. As such, people with disabilities are often discriminated against and face chronic situations of unemployment or underemployment. Even in advanced countries such as the United Kingdom, empirical evidence has shown that unemployment and underemployment have occurred in the British labour market since the 1990s (Barnes, 1992). In terms of unemployment, the tendency of British with disabilities to be out of work is three

times higher than their able-bodied peers. The duration that they are unemployed is also longer than that of their able-bodied counterparts. It was also reported that unemployment is particularly rampant amongst people with disabilities who are school-leavers and those over 50 years old (Barnes, 1992). Even when they get employed, British with disabilities face "underemployment"—a situation where they were meagrely paid and offered low-skilled and low-esteemed jobs that are "unrewarding and undemanding" as compared to their able-bodied counterparts who assumed high-esteemed positions such as lawyers, doctors and engineers. Examples of low-esteemed jobs offered to British with disabilities include routine office work, general labourers and cleaners.

Inevitably, unemployment of people with disabilities has its impact on the broader economy in terms of calculating economic losses and opportunity costs of inactivity due to disability. A study by the World Bank attempted to calculate the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) losses related to disability in Canada based on 1993 data. It was reported that a total of US\$55.8 billion (7.7%) of Canada's 1993 GDP was lost in relation to disability. A popularly cited source (Metts, 2000) estimates that the total yearly value of global GDP loss related to disability approximates between US\$1.37 and US\$1.94 trillion.

On the Malaysian front, with issues of skills shortages and talent retention, this is an opportune time to integrate Malaysians with disabilities into the mainstream workforce as an "alternative or non-traditional source of labour" (Chong, 2010). At the same time, efforts are underway to integrate Malaysians with disabilities into mainstream employment. On 16 May 1964, Malaysia signed the Proclamation on Full Participation and Equality of Disabled People in the Asia and Pacific Region. To ensure people with disabilities have access to employment opportunities, the Malaysian Government circulated a General Order (PP 10/1988) to allocate at least 1% of civil service positions to people with disabilities. The cabinet also approved the establishment of the National Coordinating Body (known as the National Advisory and Consultative Council for the Disabled People) on 25 February 1998. This council replaces the National Implementation Committee for the well-being of Malaysians with disabilities, which was earlier established on 30 August 1990. The Malaysian Government also disburses a monthly allowance of RM300 to people with disabilities who are working (with monthly income less than RM1,200) as an incentive to motivate them to be gainfully employed (SCH, 2009). More recent initiatives to protect the rights of People with Disabilities (PWDs) globally and in Malaysia include the significance of Act 2008 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was signed by the Malaysian Government on 10 April 2008. For instance, under Act 2008, a Council represented by the Chief Secretaries from various ministries and PWDs chaired by the Ministry of Women, Family and Development, was formed to monitor the implementation of facilities and services pertaining to PWDs in Malaysia.

Despite having such policies in place, studies have shown that Malaysian research, policy and provision continue to reflect a mix of medical and social models of disability that impede Malaysian PWDs from integrating into society (Jayasooria, Krishnan and Ooi, 1997; Jayasooria, 1999; Haq, 2003). Various forms of barriers such as negative attitudinal barriers, transportation barriers and environment barriers are still prevalent in the Malaysian society, which in one way or another pose as challenges for people with disabilities to be gainfully employed in modern day Malaysia. Given such challenges, this article endeavours to analyse the experiences towards employment by Malaysians with physical disabilities themselves. The following section will outline the methodology for this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study engaged a mixed research method utilising both quantitative and qualitative research approaches to understand the experiences towards employment by Malaysians with physical disabilities. To elicit quantitative data, a survey was conducted in four northern states of Peninsular Malaysia (i.e., Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak). A total sample of 487 was selected from various organisations of the disabled throughout these four northern states. With the assistance of the organisations, a purposive sampling strategy was used to identify the sample. Enumerators were then appointed to conduct face-to-face interviews with the identified samples. From the above 487 respondents who participated in this survey, (59%, 287) are categorised as people with physical disabilities whilst the remaining 200 respondents (41%) are those with hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities. The data analysis and findings for this article are based solely on the above 287 respondents with physical disabilities. Here, the limitations of statistical evidence from this small study are acknowledged. The questionnaire was a self-developed instrument for the purpose of this research, using Ramakrishnan's study (2006) as a reference. The questionnaire has 56 questions comprising both close- and open-ended questions. There are two main sections in the questionnaire: (1) demographic details of respondents (Questions 1–23) and (2) employment status (Questions 24–56). The raw data from the questionnaires were analysed using the PASW 17.0 statistical package (formerly known as SPSS). Experiences of employment were captured by asking whether respondents felt contented with their present employment and their current workplace. Questions pertaining to working hours, salary and disabled-friendly amenities were asked to gauge their levels of satisfaction with their present workplace. To determine the occurrence of discrimination at the workplace, respondents were asked whether they faced any problems or experienced any forms of discrimination from their employers, colleagues or clients.

To add depth and insight into this study, it was decided that a qualitative approach should complement the above quantitative methods given that the qualitative approach would further flesh out the nuances of "experiences of employment" in a more holistic and integrated manner (Ritchie and Lewis, 2004). Qualitative proponents (Patton, 2002) even argue that unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative research allows the researcher to study a particular phenomenon under "natural settings" without excluding their complexities. In this study, the qualitative approach was engaged through a focus group. Seven respondents who participated in the aforementioned survey were recruited (on a volunteer basis) to be participants of the focus group. The interview schedule for the focus group consists of 10 semi-structured questions. Although there are some overlap between the questions asked in the focus group and the above structured questionnaire, the focus group was undertaken successfully to tease out key issues/challenges that the respondents faced due to their physical disability. With the focus group, the researcher had an opportunity to ask "leading and probing" questions that provided insightful replies to enhance the study. It was noticed that the respondents were initially very reserved and quiet. They slowly became more vocal when each member in the group gradually "opened up" and engaged actively in relating their personal experiences and divulging issues/challenges they faced at the workplace. This is the novelty of a focus group where certain sensitive issues such as "discrimination" are more easily discussed collectively than individually.

The following section will discuss the findings obtained from the survey and focus group. The findings have been analysed, thematically coded and organised into broad themes to assimilate the respondents' experiences towards employment.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

As an overview, this study managed to interview 287 Malaysians with physical disabilities of which (66%, 189) are male and (34%, 98) female. A huge percentage (40.8%, 117 respondents)<sup>2</sup> of them is above 44 years of age whilst those in the employable age cohort of 20–44 years old comprises (55.7%, 160). More than half of the respondents are Malays (55.7%, 160), followed by Chinese (26.8%, 77) and Indians (17.1%, 49). Amongst the four northern states, Kedah has the highest incidences of people with physical disabilities (34.5%, 99) followed by Perak (30.7%, 88), Perlis (17.8%, 51) and Penang (17.1%, 49). Although The Third National Health and Morbidity Survey (2006) argues that there is no significant difference in terms of rural-urban distribution and ethnicity, this study illustrates a different picture. From the above statistics, people with physical disabilities are predominantly Malays. This reflects the



scenario in the four northern states, which coincidentally have a high proportion of Malay ethnic group; therefore, no conclusion can be made on the distribution of disability based on ethnicity. They originate from Kedah and Perak, which are less developed states compared to Penang.<sup>3</sup> In terms of educational attainment, even though some respondents receive a tertiary education, the percentage is very small (6.7%, 19). The more popular levels of education are the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) (O-levels equivalent) (28.6%, 81) and primary school education (27.2%, 77). It is also disheartening to discover that illiteracy still occurs amongst them, with (13.1%, 37) never having received any form of formal education.

In this study, (79.4%, 212) of the respondents are gainfully employed, whilst (20.6%, 55) are jobless. For those unemployed, a substantial number (63.8%, 30) claim that it is their disability that hinders their opportunity towards employment. This hindrance suggests their first account of discrimination. For those employed, their working hours normally span between five to nine hours per day (76.7%, 145) even though a small percentage (14.3%, 27) work for more than 10 hours per day. Table 1 displays the respondents' distribution of income per month. The mean income per month is RM935.76, whilst the median is RM600. However, the disparity between the highest (RM8,000) and lowest (RM20) income earner is drastic with a range of RM7,980. In this case, the median is a more accurate measurement compared to the mean given that the income data has two outliers (i.e., RM20 and RM8,000) that will influence the value of the mean.

Table 1: Some key statistics of income per month of respondents

| Statistics         | Readings    |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Mean               | 935.76      |
| Median             | 600.00      |
| Mode               | 800         |
| Standard deviation | 1044.201    |
| Variance           | 1090354.738 |
| Range              | 7980        |
| Minimum            | 20          |
| Maximum            | 8000        |

Source: Fieldwork survey (2010)

The pattern of income distribution is further analysed in Table 2. Those earning a monthly income between RM20 to RM500 register the highest percentage (41.0%), and this is closely followed by 36.5%, who have a monthly income of between RM501 to RM1,000. Only a minute percentage of 1% (2 respondents) earns more than RM5,000 per month. Despite their low income, the majority of the employees (63.5%, 132) are satisfied with their present income, whilst (36.5%, 76) state otherwise. They are discontented because they argue that the salary they receive is too low and insufficient for sustenance, especially with the rising cost of living in contemporary Malaysia. Similar to the United

Kingdom during the 1990s, a situation of "underemployment" is currently unfolding in Malaysia where the respondents claim that they are "underpaid" and the salary they receive does not reflect current market rates or is commensurate with their educational qualification. Clearly, such incidences of "underemployment" can be perceived as a form of exploitation, and for those who continue to live beneath the poverty line, this scenario is a critical issue indicating that poverty is still rampant amongst people with disabilities, making it doubly challenging to realise the present government's agenda of achieving a high-income nation.<sup>4</sup>

Table 2: Income per month of respondents

| Ringgit Malaysia (RM)<br>(per month) | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 20–500                               | 82        | 41.0       |
| 501–1000                             | 73        | 36.5       |
| 1001–1500                            | 14        | 7.0        |
| 1501–2000                            | 13        | 6.5        |
| 2001–2500                            | 5         | 2.5        |
| 2501–3000                            | 7         | 3.5        |
| 3001–5000                            | 4         | 2.0        |
| > 5000                               | 2         | 1.0        |
| Missing = 87                         |           |            |

Source: Fieldwork survey (2010)

In this study, it is also interesting to note that there is no distinctive relatedness between the employee's level of education and their opportunities of being in employment (see Table 3). Although human capital theorists (Becker, 1993; Ashton et al., 1999) argue that educational attainment has positive links with employment opportunities, this is not clearly reflected in this study. From a Chi-Square test, the Pearson Chi-Square has a value of 10.261 with a significance of 0.114. This significance value is well above the alpha level of 0.05 and is therefore not significant (see Table 3). This could suggest the presence of discrimination where potential employers judge them based on their disability and not educational attainment. As reported earlier, a high percentage of those unemployed (63.8%, 30) disclosed that their disability hindered their employment opportunities. The rejection and humiliation they often receive during job interviews was disclosed by a respondent who has the highest level of education attainment—a PhD. When he was first shortlisted for a government interview in 1983, he was truly upset to be treated with ridicule by his interviewers. The following transpired during the interview:

During the interview, various questions were asked to ridicule me just because I am a person with disabilities. The moment I opened the door to enter, they asked, "Are you handicapped?"

They even asked whether I could swim or go hiking...questions which were irrelevant to the job that I was applying for.

(Chinese male, Lecturer, 55, Penang)

The above evidence shows that possessing a high education does not automatically open all doors of employment for people with disabilities especially when employers continue to see them through a pair of discriminating lenses. Despite having a PhD, this respondent did not get employed at first. He had to attend three rounds of interviews for the teaching profession and once for the post of Diplomatic Administrative Officer. This respondent has been an active advocate for people with physical disabilities through the years, and based on his experience, the situation has improved since then. However, there is still much to be done, as most people with disabilities employed by the government are still in the lower-level support category.

Table 3: Cross tabulation between "highest level of education" and "being in employment"

| Are you currently being employed? | Highest level of education |             |             |           |           |            |                     | Total         |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|------------|---------------------|---------------|
|                                   | Primary education          | PMR/LCE     | SPM/MCE     | STPM/HSC  | Diploma   | Degree     | No formal education |               |
| Yes                               | 55<br>26.4%                | 34<br>16.3% | 68<br>32.7% | 4<br>1.9% | 9<br>4.3% | 16<br>7.7% | 22<br>10.6%         | 208<br>100.0% |
| No                                | 13<br>23.6%                | 11<br>20.0% | 11<br>20.0% | 3<br>5.5% | 3<br>5.5% | 2<br>3.6%  | 12<br>21.8%         | 55<br>100.0%  |

| Chi-Square Tests   | Value               | df | Asymp. Sig. (2 sided) |
|--------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 10.261 <sup>a</sup> | 6  | 0.114                 |

PMR = Penilaian Menengah Rendah/LCE = Lower Certificate of Education

SPM = Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/MCE = Malaysian Certificate of Education

STPM = Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia/HSC = Higher School Certificate

<sup>a</sup>3 cells (21.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.46.

Source: Fieldwork survey (2010)

However, when a Spearman's rank-order correlation was performed between the respondents' "highest educational attainment" and their "monthly income," there is a significant positive relationship, as displayed in Table 4. Results of the Spearman's rank-order correlation indicate that higher monthly incomes are associated with higher levels of education  $r(196) = 0.236, p < 0.05$ . Arguably, this correlation is only valid for people with disabilities who are working with the government because they are governed by a standard salary structure. But for those who are self-employed or work in the private sector, this finding suggests that their low educational attainment would cause them to earn

low incomes and get trapped in the cycle of poverty indefinitely because most of the employees only hold SPM certificates (28.6%, 81) and have primary school education (27.2%, 77).

Table 4: Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation between "highest educational attainment" and "monthly income"

|                      | Value | Asymp. Std. Error <sup>a</sup> | Approx. T <sup>b</sup> | Approx. Sig.       |
|----------------------|-------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Spearman Correlation | 0.236 | 0.077                          | 3.379                  | 0.001 <sup>c</sup> |

Note: <sup>a</sup>Not assuming the null hypothesis. <sup>b</sup>Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

<sup>c</sup>Based on normal approximation.

Source: Fieldwork survey (2010)

### Experiences of Employment

The following section will discuss the experiences of respondents towards their employers, colleagues and workplace. These concerns are summarised in Table 5, where they are presented in a nominal order of either "Yes" (Y) or "No" (N). From these responses, it is possible to understand to what extent social and attitudinal barriers are inherent in the workplace, which in turn act as impediments towards equitable employment opportunities.

Table 5: Summary of types of problems/barriers faced by employees

| Types of problems/barriers faced by employees | Response of employees |             |
|---|-----------------------|-------------|
|   | Yes (Y)               | No (N)      |
| Social barrier                                |                       |             |
| 1. Problems with employers                    | 16.3% (23)            | 83.7% (118) |
| 2. Problems with colleagues                   | 9.9% (14)             | 90.1% (127) |
| Attitudinal barrier                           |                       |             |
| 1. Discrimination at work                     | 13.8% (18)            | 86.2% (112) |

Source: Fieldwork survey (2010)

From this study, it is obvious that even though there are cases of social and attitudinal barriers in the workplace, the problem is not serious. For instance, only a small percentage of employees have problems with their employers (16.3%, 23) and colleagues (9.9%, 14), whilst the majority of them do not experience any forms of problem. Likewise, discrimination at work is also minimally experienced by employees where only 13.8% experience it. Nonetheless, this percentage cannot be ruled out as negligible given that the focus group session managed to flesh out the intensity of such discrimination as well as tease out other forms of challenges/issues that people with disabilities face. In this study, the dynamics of both the medical and social models of disability are inherent. These concerns are discussed in turn in the subsequent sections.

### **Unseen challenges**

In addition to the above challenges, there are hidden and "unseen" challenges faced by Malaysians with physical disabilities. One of these "unseen challenges" is caused by factors such as "location." Given the disparity in terms of development of the various northern states, this study shows that respondents who live in less developed states such as Kedah and Perlis are more disadvantaged in terms of the lack of physical infrastructure such as disabled-friendly transportation system. Here, it is disheartening to note that the "location" factor has created a group of winners and losers amongst Malaysians with physical disabilities given that inequality towards the accessibility of physical amenities is happening between respondents in Kedah and Perlis (less developed states) compared to Penang and Kuala Lumpur (more developed urban areas). It can be considered that people with disabilities residing in Kedah and Perlis are less fortunate and more disadvantaged than those living in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. This issue is succinctly described by a female Malay clerk who resides in Perlis:

Most of the disabled-friendly amenities and support services are concentrated in Kuala Lumpur and not in other less developed states. Penang has these amenities, too, but not Kedah and Perlis. In my state (referring to Perlis), transportation for people with disabilities is a great problem. There should be standardised amenities for all states in Malaysia and not only in more developed states such as Kuala Lumpur and Penang. There are people with disabilities here who want to go out from their houses but are deterred by the unfriendly transportation system.

(Malay female, Clerk, 33, Perlis)

Additionally, another respondent lamented that people with disabilities continue to face challenges that "normal people" will never encounter. The term "normal people" was continuously used by the respondents throughout the focus group session. This gives the researcher the impression that people with disabilities themselves tend to have the perception that they are inferior compared to their able-bodied peers. In this case, the respondents address their able-bodied peers as "normal," thus, suggesting that they (the respondents) perceive themselves as "abnormal" people compared to their able-bodied. For instance, one participant emphasises that people with disabilities are often perceived as "unseen and invisible" entities when applying for jobs. He related the following with a tone of disappointment:

We feel excluded from mainstream society. For instance, even newspaper advertisements (for jobs) sideline us as if we are "unseen and invisible" entities. I feel that...instead of just specifying the type of pre-requisite/requirements that companies need such as "male, female, SPM (O-levels equivalent), Bachelors degree, etc.", the advertisements should also spell out that they are inviting "people with disabilities" to join their companies. Otherwise, we feel marginalised and lack confidence to apply and respond to such advertisements.

(Malay male, Own boss, 38, Kedah)

### **Unheard voices**

When asked whether their salaries were commensurate with their educational qualification, the response was mixed. This was not a concern with respondents who work with the government given that the salaries of civil servants are governed by a fixed salary structure. However, there was a case where a respondent who works with the government feels that her salary is higher than her contribution at work. This in turn creates pressure on her and is seen as a work challenge.

My salary is commensurate with my qualification because it is based on the structure by the government...But I feel my productivity at work is far below compared to the salary I receive.

(Chinese female, Research officer, 28, Penang)

Even though this respondent happened to be a high-achiever during her varsity days, she feels that her present employer is not giving her work that matches her university qualification. She suspects that this could be due to her disability. She disclosed the following as challenges she faces at the workplace:

I do not have much interest in my work. I feel that the work I do now is incompatible with my abilities and personality. The workload here is minimal; there isn't room to improve myself and I do not get much chance to use my communicational skills...But I cannot do anything. I should be grateful because being employed in this job entitles me to lead a better life especially in terms of financial security.

(Chinese female, Research officer, 28, Penang)

Clearly, her "silent grouses" will never be heard by either her employer or her colleagues. Despite her good grades at university, the respondent feels that her employer and colleagues still lack confidence with her ability (due to her disability) to perform more complex work tasks.

### **Unspoken desires**

In addition to fleshing out the "unseen challenges" and "unheard voices," the focus group session also managed to tease out some of the "unspoken desires" of the respondents. Although there are existing policies in Malaysia that advocate the rights of people with disabilities (as reviewed earlier), unfortunately, these policies often remain as mere "policy statements" that do not translate into reality. The following quote demonstrates the agitation, frustration and disappointment of a respondent who has "great desires" to seek better employment, but her hopes are shattered due to the lackadaisical attitude of the government. When asked whether the government is intervening enough to elevate the status of people with disabilities and integrate them into mainstream society, the response below shows that the welfare and rights of people with disabilities are not considered top priority by the government.

The government is not doing enough. At this moment, there are many unemployed graduates. People with disabilities are sidelined because the government is more concerned with addressing the issue of graduate unemployment. We, people with disabilities, are totally dismissed from the government's overall agenda since the attention is now on unemployed graduates. They get the priority for employment, not us. People with disabilities only get unskilled, part-time and low-esteemed jobs in supermarkets or grocery shops. We also have the desire to be employed in jobs with better prospects. Except for my slower gait in walking, my other faculties (i.e., mental, sight, speech etc.) are in perfect condition and comparable to my able-bodied peers. I feel I deserve equal attention as that given to unemployed graduates.

(Malay female, Clerk, 33, Perlis)

In the case of a person with disabilities who owns his own small business printing and selling T-shirts, he faces no physical barriers considering that his shop is located in a small complex specially fitted out for people with disabilities. Instead, his biggest challenge is his customers. He has a great desire to work hard and to live up to the expectations of his customers, but to no avail.

I do not face any physical barriers here because this business complex is specially designed for people with disabilities. It is well equipped with ramps, railings, disabled-friendly toilets, etc. However, my biggest problem is—the customers. My customers are normal (indicating able-bodied individuals) people, while I am a person with disabilities. When operating the machine to print T-shirts, normal people press the machine with their legs while I do it with my hands because I am wheelchair-bound. Due to my disability, I take a longer time and do things slower. Customers here are impatient and they want things done immediately. Even though I have the desire to work hard since I am the boss of this shop, I cannot seem to live up to the demanding expectations of normal people.

(Malay male, Owner of T-shirt shop, 38, Kedah)

In brief, Table 6 summarises the key themes that emerged from the focus group discussion, namely, physical barriers, social barriers and the inadequate role of the state.

Table 6: Key themes from focus group discussion

| Key themes            | Dimensions  |
|-----------------------|---|
| Environmental barrier | 1. Inadequate public transportation system for PWDs   |
| Social barrier        | 1. Unequal employment opportunity<br>2. Discrimination at work (by employers and colleagues)<br>3. Inadequate state intervention and assistance |

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Malaysia's disabling environment and the existence of various forms of barriers (i.e., institutional, attitudinal, etc.) collectively pose as a bigger challenge to Malaysians with physical disabilities than their own physical impairments. From this study, clearly, the approach towards employment opportunities for Malaysians with physical disabilities is underpinned with a mix of medical and social models of disability. Despite having the requisite educational attainment, not all doors of employment are open to them. Even if they are gainfully employed, a myriad of workplace issues and challenges await them and continue to persist. The situation is doubly challenging for those who are unemployed and underemployed where they continue to be trapped in the cycle of indefinite poverty and be labelled as a social underclass. Amongst themselves, Malaysians with physical disabilities are divided into winners and losers. The winners are



those who reside in more developed states (i.e., Penang, Kuala Lumpur) and hold government jobs with more assured incomes whilst the losers are those living in less developed states (i.e., Kedah, Perlis, Perak) engaging in low-skilled private sector jobs with no promise of a better future. It is disheartening to discover that their perceptions towards employment sounded more like frustrated pleas—as if they are bargaining and lobbying for their rights towards more equitable employment opportunities and a better livelihood. People with physical disabilities are not any different from their able-bodied counterparts. Except for certain physical impairments, they have normal mental capabilities that enable them to perform all kinds of tasks.

Globally, the way forward is to remove all barriers towards equitable employment opportunities for people with disabilities, but in Malaysia, the means to this global end is challenged by local idiosyncrasies. As illustrated in the above qualitative evidence, dialectics remain where local mindsets, values and cultures continue to create a discriminatory setting for Malaysians with disabilities. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the government and all stakeholders should collectively take heed of the "unseen challenges, unheard voices and unspoken desires" of Malaysians with physical disabilities so that existing Malaysian laws drafted with the intention of helping people with disabilities live up to their promise and potential. Currently, there are no anti-discrimination laws in Malaysia to protect people with disabilities. Hence, the Malaysian Government should formulate an anti-discrimination law to champion for the rights of people with disabilities.

Malaysians with physical disabilities no longer want to be objects of charity or sympathy. Just like their able-bodied peers, they too want to experience and enjoy their rights as fully-fledged Malaysian citizens. After assimilating their "unseen, unheard and unspoken" employment experiences, it is now time to engage and act upon them. The time has come to translate inaction to action so that Malaysians with physical disabilities can reinstate their citizenry in the Malaysian society and claim their rights towards equitable employment opportunities just like their able-bodied counterparts.

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## **NOTES**

1. Malaysia's current poverty line is RM720 (Ministry of Human Resources, 2010).
2. The "percentage" and "frequency" for each variable is shown within the brackets.
3. According to statistics from the Economic Planning Unit, (2010), there is a vast difference in terms of mean monthly gross household income between the more developed states (i.e.; Penang, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur) and the less developed

states such as Perlis, Kedah and Perak. The respective mean monthly gross household income for these states are as follows:

Less developed states: Kedah = RM2,408; Perak = RM2,545; Perlis = RM2,541 More developed states: Penang = RM4,004; Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur = RM5,322

4. Malaysia's recently published Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011–2015) reports that Malaysia is currently charting her development towards a high-income nation. In 2015, Malaysia's gross national income per capita is targeted to rise to RM38,850 or US\$12,140 (Malaysia, 2010: 2).

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