



Employment rights for persons with disabilities in Bishoftu City, Ethiopia

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, 17.6% of the population lived with disabilities, yet their employment rights remained inadequately protected, hindering socio-economic development. Despite Ethiopia's ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the enactment of domestic laws such as Proclamation No. 568/2008, approximately 95% of persons with disabilities lived in poverty, and 60% were unemployed. Other figures indicated that around 15-20% of the population had disabilities, and some reports suggested that up to 80% of persons with disabilities faced unemployment, further exacerbating persons with disabilities' socio-economic challenges. This study employed a qualitative, descriptive design to assess the adequacy of legal and institutional frameworks for protecting employment rights. Data were collected through key informant interviews with 16 representatives from the Oromia Bureau of Women and Social Affairs, governmental bodies, and NGOs. Thematic analysis identified significant gaps in implementation, including widespread discrimination, limited access to education and vocational training, and exclusionary workplace policies. The results of the study indicated the urgent need for stronger enforcement of existing laws, awareness campaigns to combat stigma, and investments in accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies. The study recommended targeted vocational training, inclusive workplace policies, and regular monitoring to ensure equitable employment opportunities. Dealing with these challenges, Ethiopia could have promoted inclusive socio-economic development and empowered persons with disabilities to fully participate in the labor market.

Key terms: disabilities, human rights, employment rights, labor law, Ethiopia

Introduction

This study examined the employment rights of persons with disabilities in Bishoftu City, Ethiopia, focusing on the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and practical conditions affecting their access to work. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzed both international and domestic legal instruments concerning disability rights and included interviews with stakeholders, such as persons with disabilities, employers, and policymakers. Exploring the barriers faced in securing decent employment, including social stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of institutional support, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the current state of employment rights for individuals with disabilities in Bishoftu. It aimed to contribute to policy discussions and offer recommendations for improving persons with disabilities socio-economic standing.

Literature

Throughout history, the struggle for the rights of persons with disabilities has been marked by stigma, discrimination, and barriers (Shimeles, 2019). The recognition of persons with disabilities rights, including the right to work, at international, regional, and national levels stems from this struggle. Despite this acknowledgment, persons with disabilities still face significant challenges in accessing decent jobs and favorable working conditions.

Discrepancies in disability prevalence rates in Ethiopia, as reported by various organizations and studies, stem from several factors, including differences in methodologies, definitions of disability, data collection techniques, and regional variations. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank often use a broad definition of disability, covering physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental health impairments, as well as functional limitations in daily activities (WHO & World Bank, 2011). In contrast, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) adopts a narrower definition, focusing on severe disabilities that significantly restrict an individual's ability to participate in society (UNICEF, 2013). Similarly, local studies, such as the one conducted in the Sidama National Regional State, might use a more limited or culturally specific definition of disability, leading to lower reported prevalence rates (Malle, 2015; Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2014).

Regional variations also play a significant role in these discrepancies. According to Teferi (2018), regions with more advanced healthcare systems tend to report higher disability rates due to better diagnosis and reporting mechanisms. On the other hand, in regions where stigma or cultural beliefs discourage disclosure, disabilities are often underreported. Additionally, areas affected by conflict or extreme poverty may have higher disability rates due to factors such as injuries, malnutrition, and lack of access to healthcare (World Bank, 2021).

In Ethiopia, the stigma associated with disability frequently results in underreporting. Families hide individuals with disabilities due to fear of discrimination or social exclusion (Selamawit, 2012). Moreover, individuals with disabilities may not self-identify as disabled, especially if their impairments are not visibly apparent or if they have adapted to their conditions. This reluctance to self-identify further complicates accurate data collection and contributes to the underestimation of disability prevalence.

Ethiopia is a signatory to various international human rights instruments, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and has incorporated

employment rights into domestic legislation. However, in regions like Oromia, there are no specific rules or strategies to implement these laws effectively, and institutional frameworks to protect these rights are lacking. Consequently, many persons with disabilities face challenges such as reliance on family support, psychological issues, and health problems due to unemployment. This study will assess the adequacy and implementation of legislation regarding the employment rights of persons with disabilities, focusing on the situation in Bishoftu City.

Theoretical basis of disability and persons with disabilities and an Ethiopian models

Before discussing the employment rights of persons with disabilities, understanding the meaning of disability is important for a good understanding of the issues of persons with disabilities. The term disability is variable from time to time and from place to place to place. There are five major theoretical views on the concept of disability, which influenced the definition given to the term under different conventions and national laws; charity approach, medical approach, social approach, biopsychosocial approach, and human rights-based approach (Andreas, 2019).

Charity approach

The charity model regards persons with disabilities as being dependent and helpless (Ethiopia's National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities (2012-2021). According to this approach, persons with disabilities are considered as objects of charity, having nothing to give, but only to receive, inherently poor, needing to and reinforced by culture and religious beliefs and practices. Societies are believed to have a responsibility to support those (Shimeles, 2019).

Medical/individual approach

The medical model, often referred to as the "personal tragedy theory," frames disability as an individual deficit requiring medical intervention. According to this perspective, disability is seen as a problem within the person that must be treated or rehabilitated (Oliver, 1990). The focus is on curing or managing impairments rather than addressing societal barriers (Shakespeare, 2006). This approach has been criticized for disempowering people with disabilities by positioning them as passive recipients of medical care rather than active participants in society (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

Social model

The social model of disability challenges the medical perspective by arguing that disability is socially constructed. This model, developed by disability activists and scholars (UPIAS, 1976; Oliver, 1990), asserts that disability arises from societal barriers such as inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and exclusionary policies rather than from individual impairments. According to this view, society must adapt to include people with disabilities rather than expecting them to conform to working norms (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). The social model has been instrumental in advancing disability rights movements globally (Shakespeare, 2006).

Bio-psychosocial approach

The biopsychosocial model serves as a middle ground between the medical and social models of disability. It recognizes both individual impairments and negative societal factors as contributors to disability discrimination (Andreas, 2019). This model is reflected in the CRPD, which defines

persons with disabilities as individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when combined with various barriers, hinder persons with disabilities full participation in society (Article 1 of the CRPD, 2019).

Similarly, Article 2(1) of the Employment Rights of Persons with Disabilities Proclamation No. 568/2008 defines persons with disabilities as those whose equal employment opportunities are diminished due to physical, mental, or sensory impairments, along with social, economic, and cultural discrimination. This definition aligns with the biopsychosocial theory by incorporating both individual impairments and broader societal influences.

Human rights-based approach

This approach to disability is rooted in the social model, asserting that all individuals are equal and entitled to human rights without distinction (Ethiopia's National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities, 2012-2021). It emphasizes that both society and governments are responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities through legislation and anti-discrimination enforcement.

Currently, social, biopsychosocial, and human rights-based approaches dominate the discourse on disability, while outdated charity and medical models are being phased out. Significant scholarly work exists on the employment rights of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia and internationally. Notable contributions include Shimeles's thesis on the enforcement of these rights, which identifies severe impairments, access issues, and discriminatory attitudes from employers as major barriers to employment (Shimeles, 2019). Wondemeneh (2018) examined the enforceability of anti-discrimination laws in Ethiopia, South Africa, and the European Union, highlighting the lack of consolidated disability laws and enforcement institutions in Ethiopia, which weakens employment rights compared to South Africa. Selamawit (2012) focused on the challenges faced by women with disabilities, concluding that inadequate implementation of disability laws prevents their access to promotions and training.

Marishet (2012) discussed the historical and structural employment exclusions faced by persons with disabilities, attributing these challenges to employer biases regarding productivity and accommodation costs. This research explored various mechanisms, such as quota systems and sheltered employment, aimed at rectifying these exclusions. However, there is a lack of scholarly work addressing the status and challenges of employment rights for persons with disabilities in Oromia. This research aims to fill that gap in the literature.

Disability support models in Ethiopia

The understanding and support systems for persons with disabilities in Ethiopia have evolved over time, shaped by shifting theoretical perspectives and policy frameworks. Historically, disability was viewed through the lens of charity or medical models, which either framed persons with disabilities as passive recipients of aid or as individuals requiring medical intervention. However, contemporary approaches increasingly adopt the social, bio psychosocial, and human rights-based models, emphasizing societal inclusion and equal rights.

Ethiopia's disability support models reflect this transition, though challenges remain in implementation. The human rights-based approach, influenced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), has become the dominant framework. This is

evident in policies such as Proclamation No. 568/2008, which mandates employment quotas and reasonable accommodations, and the National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2012-2021), which promotes inclusive education and healthcare. Despite these legal provisions, enforcement remains inconsistent, leaving many persons with disabilities to rely on advocacy groups like the Ethiopian National Disability Action Network (ENAD) to push for their rights.

The social model has also gained traction, recognizing that disability is not an individual deficit but a result of societal barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure and discriminatory attitudes. In urban areas like Addis Ababa, efforts have been made to introduce ramps and tactile pavements, yet these measures are often sporadic and poorly maintained. Persons with disabilities frequently resort to self-advocacy and community support networks to navigate these challenges, particularly in rural areas where services are scarce.

Meanwhile, the bio psychosocial approach, which blends medical and social perspectives, is reflected in Ethiopia's rehabilitation services and vocational training programs. Hospitals like ALERT in Addis Ababa provide prosthetics and physiotherapy, while NGOs such as Light for the World offer psychosocial support and skills training. However, access to these services is limited, forcing many to depend on informal family networks or local disability associations for survival.

Despite progress, remnants of the charity model persist, especially in rural and religious communities where persons with disabilities are often seen as objects of pity rather than active citizens. Some individuals accept this aid out of necessity, while others resist dependency by seeking education and employment opportunities.

Persons with disabilities in Ethiopia employ various strategies to cope with systemic gaps. Some join self-help groups and cooperatives, such as artisan associations for the blind, to secure livelihoods. Others leverage NGO partnerships to access training and advocacy platforms. Younger activists increasingly use social media and digital campaigns to demand accountability and visibility.

However, significant barriers remain, including weak enforcement of disability laws, persistent stigma, and rural-urban disparities in service provision. While Ethiopia has made strides in adopting progressive policies, the lived reality for many persons with disabilities still involves exclusion and struggle. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, improving accessibility, and amplifying the voices of persons with disabilities in policymaking are crucial steps toward genuine inclusion.

Legal and institutional frameworks on the persons with disabilities' right to work

Throughout history, there have been struggles for the productive and independent lives of persons with disabilities in societies ingrained with stigma, discrimination, and attitudinal and environmental barriers. The recognition of persons with disabilities human rights including the right to work at international, regional, and national levels is the result of these bitter struggles. Starting from Recommendation 22 adopted at the International Labor Conference in 1925 to the most recent CRPD, persons with disabilities human rights have gained varying legal recognitions. In the next Section, these international and regional legal instruments will be discussed briefly.

International legal instrument son employment rights of persons with disabilities

The right to employment for persons with disabilities is crucial for securing basic needs such as shelter, clothing, and food, directly linking it to the right to food and life under Article 6 and 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the first binding international legal instrument focused on the rights of persons with disabilities. Adopted to address the shortcomings of previous non-binding declarations, it defines persons with disabilities as individuals with long-term impairments that hinder persons with disabilities full participation in society (Article 1 of the CRPD, 2019).

Article 27 of the CRPD specifically outlines the right to employment, emphasizing equality in the workplace. It mandates state parties to prohibit discrimination based on disability in all employment aspects, including recruitment, conditions of employment, career advancement, and workplace safety. Additionally, states are required to create favorable working conditions, provide training, and implement affirmative measures to encourage the employment of persons with disabilities. The CRPD also establishes mechanisms for implementation and monitoring, requiring state parties to create domestic institutions responsible for the Convention's execution and to report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities every four years, or as requested (Articles 33, 34, and 35 of the CRPD).

Enforcement mechanisms of employment rights of persons with disabilities

The review of international legal instruments and countries' domestic legislations shows that different mechanisms that have been used to rectify historical and structural employment exclusion faced by persons with disabilities for persons with disabilities such as quota system, sheltered employment, supported employment and self-employment, and microfinance services (Marishet, 2012).

Quota system

The quota system is a common mechanism used in various countries to address the historical employment exclusion faced by persons with disabilities. It requires employers to reserve a certain percentage of job positions for individuals with disabilities, particularly in countries with high unemployment rates among this group (Arthur O'Reilly, 2017).

However, the quota system faces criticism for two main reasons. First, it may create the perception that hiring persons with disabilities is burdensome, suggesting that employers need coercion to do so (Marishet, 2012). Second, it contradicts the notion that individuals with disabilities should be hired based on persons with disabilities abilities and skills, given adequate support and resources (Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018).

The Employment Rights of Persons with Disabilities Proclamation No. 568/2008 in Ethiopia abolished the previous quota system, reflecting these concerns. Nonetheless, empirical research on the adverse effects of the quota system in Ethiopia is lacking. Other countries, such as Nigeria and Uganda, continue to implement similar quota systems, with Nigeria mandating that public organizations employ at least 5% persons with disabilities and Uganda enshrining such provisions in its Persons with Disability Act (2019).

Sheltered employment

Sheltered employment offers a viable option for persons with disabilities who may struggle to find or maintain jobs in the open labor market due to the severity of their disabilities or limited work capacity (Marishet, 2012). This approach involves providing jobs in specialized environments or segregated sections of regular enterprises and is supported by international frameworks such as ILO Recommendation No. 168 and the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities.

The rationale behind sheltered employment is twofold: it serves as an alternative work avenue for individuals with disabilities and provides ongoing training to facilitate potential transitions to competitive employment. However, this system faces criticism for fostering segregation and reinforcing stereotypes. Critics argue that it adopts a charitable approach rather than embracing the social model, thereby undermining the autonomy and independence of individuals with disabilities to pursue employment in an open labor market alongside their non-disabled peers.

Supported employment

Supported employment mechanism proposes a special paid employment scheme and is aimed at integrating persons with disabilities into regular employment with continued support in the competitive open labor market (Paul, 1999). In this system, persons with disabilities become regular employees within businesses, working alongside their peers, receiving wages, benefits, and tailored interventions such as rehabilitation and training to meet disabilities specific needs and capabilities (John, 2002). Due to the continuous and intensive support required by supported employment, some critics argue that it is burdensome and may also lead to placing individuals with disabilities in low-quality employment simply for the sake of integration.

Research approach and design

This qualitative study with a descriptive design assessed the legal and institutional frameworks protecting the employment rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Bishoftu City, Ethiopia. Data was gathered from primary sources (interviews, legal documents) and secondary sources (books, journals, reports). The target population included employed and unemployed PWDs from private, NGO, and government sectors, with purposive sampling ensuring diverse representation by gender and disability type.

Data collection involved 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) with officials from the Oromia Bureau of Women and Social Affairs, other government bodies, and NGOs. Thematic analysis examined international (e.g., UN CRPD) and domestic (e.g., Ethiopia's Proclamation No. 568/2008) legal frameworks, supplemented by interview insights. Triangulation ensured validity, providing a comprehensive evaluation of employment rights protections for PWDs.

Results and Discussion

The 2011 WHO and World Bank report highlighted a stark reality in Ethiopia: approximately 17.6% of the population, or over 15 million people, lived with disabilities. This figure was not just a statistic; it represented millions of individuals who faced systemic barriers to education, employment, and social participation. Among them, 95% lived in poverty, and 60% of working-age individuals with disabilities were unemployed. These numbers painted a grim picture of

exclusion and marginalization, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive policies and practices (WHO & World Bank, 2011).

The roots of this exclusion could be traced back to deeply entrenched societal attitudes and structural barriers. For instance, Tirussew (1995) highlighted how persons with disabilities in Ethiopia were often viewed through a lens of pity or charity rather than as capable individuals with equal rights. This perception perpetuated a cycle of poverty and dependency, limiting opportunities for education and employment. Even when persons with disabilities managed to secure jobs, they often faced discrimination in the workplace. A study by Selamawit (2019) revealed that 66.67% of women with disabilities reported being overlooked for promotions, transfers, and training opportunities, despite having similar job statuses as their non-disabled colleagues. This blatant violation of employment rights not only stifled their career growth but also reinforced economic marginalization (Selamawit, 2019).

Bishoftu City, one of the oldest cities in the Oromia Region, offered a microcosm of these broader challenges. Historically, Bishoftu had been a hub for disability services, most notably through the Bishoftu City School for the Blind. This institution stood as a testament to the city's early efforts to address the educational needs of persons with disabilities. However, the presence of a significant number of unemployed persons with disabilities in Bishoftu suggested that educational services alone were insufficient to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion. The exact number of unemployed persons with disabilities in the city remained unknown, highlighting a critical gap in data collection and local-level research. Without accurate data, it became nearly impossible to design targeted interventions that addressed the specific needs of this population (Bishoftu City Administration, 2018).

The challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Bishoftu and across Ethiopia were multifaceted. Attitudinal barriers, such as stigma and discrimination, remained pervasive, often discouraging individuals from seeking employment or participating fully in society. Structural barriers, including inaccessible infrastructure and transportation, further limited persons with disabilities' ability to access education, healthcare, and job opportunities. While Ethiopia had made strides in enacting progressive laws, such as the Proclamation on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Proclamation No. 568/2008), the implementation and enforcement of these laws remained weak. This gap between policy and practice left many persons with disabilities without the protections and opportunities they were entitled to (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2008).

The high poverty and unemployment rates among persons with disabilities also had broader socio-economic implications. When a significant portion of the population was excluded from the labor market, it is not only undermined their individual well-being but also hampered the country's overall development. Persons with disabilities represented a vast, untapped resource that could have contributed to Ethiopia's socio-economic growth if given the opportunity. However, achieving this required a concerted effort to address the systemic barriers that perpetuated their exclusion (WHO & World Bank, 2011).

In Bishoftu, the historical presence of disability services provided a foundation upon which to build more inclusive policies and programs. However, these efforts needed to go beyond education to encompass employment, healthcare, and social inclusion. Local governments, in collaboration with civil society and the private sector, had to take proactive steps to gather accurate data on the population of persons with disabilities, employment status, and specific

needs. This data should have informed the design of targeted interventions, such as vocational training programs, accessible infrastructure projects, and awareness campaigns to combat stigma (Bishoftu City Administration, 2018).

Moreover, there was a need for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and policies to ensure that persons with disabilities had equal access to employment opportunities. Employers needed to be educated on the value of diversity and inclusion, and incentives should have been provided to encourage the hiring and promotion of persons with disabilities. Public awareness campaigns could have played a crucial role in shifting societal attitudes and fostering a culture of inclusion (Selamawit, 2019).

Ethiopia's domestic legislations on the persons with disabilities right to employment

Ethiopia has made progressive efforts to entrench and protect the rights of persons with disabilities including the right to employment through its domestic legislation, and by adopting international and regional instruments. As part of this effort, Ethiopia has adopted most of the international instruments protecting human rights in general and the rights of persons with disabilities in particular including the UN Convention on the Rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD). Moreover, Ethiopia has incorporated the persons with disabilities right to work in several domestic legislations. The 1995 FDRE Constitution and Right to Employment of Persons with Disability Proclamation No. 568/2008 are the main legislations that address the rights of persons with disabilities in general and right to employment in particular.

The 1995 FDRE Constitution

The 1995 FDRE Constitution, which is the supreme law of the land in the country, has directly and implicitly enshrined the rights of persons with disabilities in general, and the right to employment in particular. Article 25 of the Constitution on the right to equality reads as follows:

“All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection without discrimination on grounds of race or other status.”

Although not explicit, this provision implicitly guarantees the equality of persons with disabilities with other persons without any discrimination.

Other legislations, policies, and action plans

Ethiopia has addressed the employment rights of persons with disabilities through several fragmented laws, notably the Right to Employment of Persons with Disability Proclamation No. 568/2008. This proclamation improved upon its predecessor, Proclamation No. 101/1994, by abolishing the quota system, redefining disability, ensuring reasonable accommodation, and shifting the burden of proof in discrimination cases from the employee to the employer. However, it still faces limitations, such as excluding judicial employees from its scope.

The Federal Civil Servant Proclamation No. 1064/2017 prohibits discrimination against job seekers and civil servants with disabilities, mandates affirmative action in recruitment and training, and requires government institutions to create supportive work environments. Similarly, Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 prohibits discrimination in private sector employment.

Directives from the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoLSA) grant additional scores in recruitment as an affirmative action for persons with disabilities in both civil service and private institutions. The Building Proclamation No. 624/2009 mandates accessibility in construction, indirectly supporting employability.

Additionally, the National Employment Policy and Strategy of Ethiopia outlines key strategies for enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities in the labor market, including inclusive education, skill development, and raising awareness among employers. Together, these legal frameworks and policies aim to promote the employment rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities in Ethiopia.

Institutional frameworks on persons with disabilities matters in Ethiopia

Governmental organizations

Governmental organizations historically played a significant role in addressing issues related to persons with disabilities in Ethiopia. The primary government organ entrusted with power and responsibilities in this area was the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA). Within MoLSA, the Department of Rehabilitation Affairs was mandated to coordinate disability issues at the federal level, providing policy guidance and technical support to other state organs (MoLSA, 2015). At the regional level, the Oromia Bureau for Women and Social Affairs (BoWSA) was responsible for implementing national disability policies and promoting the integration of persons with disabilities within the Oromia region (BoWSA, 2016). In addition to MoLSA, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education also held significant responsibilities in promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly in areas such as healthcare access and inclusive education (Ministry of Health, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2017).

Private actors and non-governmental institutions also played a crucial role in advancing the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. The Federation of Ethiopian National Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPD) and the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) were actively engaged in promoting the human rights of persons with disabilities and advocating for persons with disabilities inclusion in society (FENAPD, 2018; EWDNA, 2019). Additionally, the Ethiopia National Disability Action Network (ENDAN) facilitated the exchange of information among organizations working on disability issues and coordinated efforts to ensure a unified approach to disability advocacy (ENDAN, 2017). Another key player was the Ethiopian Centre for Disability and Development (ECDD), which implemented programs in rural and urban development, inclusive education, health services, and initiatives targeting children and youth with disabilities (ECDD, 2020). These organizations collectively contributed to raising awareness, improving access to services, and advocating for policy changes to support persons with disabilities in Ethiopia.

Challenges in protecting employment rights of persons with disabilities in Bishoftu City

Legal and institutional challenges

In Ethiopia, disability laws were fragmented and difficult to access, understand, and implement due to the lack of a comprehensive disability act that consolidated all rights into a single legal document (KIIs, 2023). This resulted in a regulatory landscape that hindered effective

enforcement, unlike countries such as Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa, which had better protections through consolidated laws (FGDs, 2023).

Furthermore, there was no quota system for including persons with disabilities in employment across governmental and non-governmental sectors, nor were there tax incentives for employers who hired them (Interviews, 2023). The insufficient sanctions for violations outlined in Employment of Persons with Disability Proclamation No. 568/2008 further weakened the enforcement of employment rights (Proclamation No. 568/2008).

At the regional level, key informant interviews revealed a significant legislative gap, particularly in Oromia, where there was no effective law governing the implementation of employment rights under the federal proclamation (KII, 2023). Additionally, the absence of a strong central institution impeded the full realization and enforcement of these rights for persons with disabilities in Bishoftu City (KII, 2023).

Practical challenges

Data from key informant interviews, individual interviews, focus group discussions, and personal observations revealed several key challenges in promoting and protecting the employment rights of persons with disabilities (KII, FGDs, Interviews, 2023). These included a lack of institutional commitment to enforcing disability laws, social stigma, discrimination, and inadequate access to reasonable accommodations and vocational training (FGDs, 2023). Both governmental and non-governmental organizations often prioritized specific goals over the broader aim of supporting the employment rights of persons with disabilities (KII, 2023). Budget constraints exacerbated these challenges, with many employers citing insufficient funds as a reason for not hiring individuals with disabilities (Interviews, 2023). The lack of accurate data on persons with disabilities further hampered efforts to protect their employment rights, as there was no inclusive data recording system in place (KII, 2023).

In Bishoftu City, infrastructural deficiencies in governmental buildings, such as the absence of accessible toilets, lifts, and signage, posed significant barriers (Observations, 2023). Reasonable accommodations, which should have included both physical access and technological support, were largely lacking (FGDs, 2023). Employed persons with disabilities often did not receive the legally required assistance, and there was insufficient information available about their rights, contributing to stigma and discrimination (Interviews, 2023).

While NGOs in Bishoftu showed better disability inclusion and accessibility, the absence of vocational training centers remained a major obstacle, limiting opportunities for skill development (KII, 2023). Establishing such centers could have significantly enhanced the productivity and livelihood of persons with disabilities in the community (FGDs, 2023). The following sections explored practical challenges related to job access, education and training, and the psychological impacts of unemployment on persons with disabilities.

Job opportunity

Data indicated that youth with disabilities faced significant barriers to job access, with individual interviews revealing limited opportunities primarily in professional fields such as teaching, advising, and the arts (Interviews, 2023). Commercial activities remained largely inaccessible due to financial institutions' reluctance to support these vulnerable groups and societal misconceptions about their skills (FGDs, 2023).

While governmental institutions appeared more open to hiring youth with disabilities, they still failed to create sufficient job opportunities. Most employed individuals were found in government roles or NGOs, while private sector businesses were less likely to hire those (KII, 2023). Unemployed participants cited a lack of interest from both governmental and non-governmental organizations, which often preferred non-disabled candidates despite their meeting educational and skill requirements (Interviews, 2023).

Interviews with the Bureau of Women and Social Affairs (BoWSA) at regional and woreda levels highlighted that job access depended on factors such as the type and severity of disabilities, education, and overall labor market inclusiveness (KII, 2023). Challenges such as outdated hiring practices, lack of support services, and negative employer attitudes further hindered job security for youth with disabilities (BoWSA, 2023). However, BoWSA officials noted that candidates with disabilities received priority and additional points during recruitment as an affirmative action, and specific non-competitive opportunities existed for certain disabilities (BoWSA, 2023).

One official stated, *“Access to jobs somehow existed even though the unemployment rate was high in our region. We had some regulations that supported persons with disabilities’ skill development and provided employment opportunities”* (BoWSA, 2023).

Participants noted that employment opportunities for persons with disabilities often varied by disability type. For instance, individuals with visual impairments worked in administration and legal fields, while those with hearing impairments found roles in manufacturing and assembly. Those with physical impairments pursued careers in accounting, human resources, or ICT, often leveraging technology to expand their capabilities (FGDs, 2023). However, this job classification contradicted human rights principles regarding employment (Interviews, 2023).

Most youth with disabilities accessed only micro and small-scale enterprise opportunities, facing limitations in finance, workspace, and skill development (FGDs, 2023). A key informant from the Siiqree Women Association in Bishoftu City highlighted persistent discrimination and stigma, which hindered job opportunities. These issues included a lack of accessible transportation and inadequate information, constituting violations of their employment rights (KII, 2023).

Education and training

Focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed a significant lack of access to meaningful training opportunities for youth with disabilities. Participants noted that available training often lacked relevance to their goals and interests, with both governmental and non-governmental organizations showing limited awareness of their potential and needs (FGDs, 2023). Individual interviews further corroborated this lack of access, highlighting systemic gaps in addressing the specific requirements of youth with disabilities (Interviews, 2023). Key informant interviews (KII) with officials from the Bureau of Women and Social Affairs (BoWSA) acknowledged

some existing programs but emphasized challenges such as inadequate inclusive policies, financial constraints, and insufficient support services (KIIs, 2023).

The National Plan of Action for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (2010-2020) had assigned the Ministry of Education and regional education bureaus the responsibility for providing educational opportunities. While progress had been made in establishing special needs education, shortcomings persisted in teacher training and the availability of appropriate materials (National Plan of Action, 2010-2020). These findings underscored the need for more targeted and inclusive approaches to address the barriers faced by youth with disabilities in accessing relevant training and educational opportunities.

The responsibilities of stakeholders

The government was a key stakeholder in safeguarding the employment rights of persons with disabilities, as outlined in Proclamation Number 568/2008. Article 9 empowered the Council of Ministers to issue regulations for effective implementation, while the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs and regional authorities were authorized to issue directives and monitor compliance. However, reports indicated a significant lack of implementation, particularly regarding regional directives.

The Ministry of Education played a vital role in educating and empowering persons with disabilities to compete in the labor market, while the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MOWSA) focused on creating job opportunities and raising awareness about disability rights. Regional bureaus of education and labor also shared these responsibilities. Disability People's Organizations and NGOs were crucial in advocating for employment rights, and employers, along with society as a whole, bore the responsibility of respecting and promoting these rights. Active collaboration among these stakeholders was essential for advancing the employment rights of persons with disabilities.

Solutions for employment rights of persons with disabilities in Bishoftu City

Promoting and safeguarding the employment rights of persons with disabilities required a clear and effective disability rights protection approach. As highlighted by the leader of the Siiqee Women's Development Association, integrating both social and human rights models was vital. Persons with disabilities often faced social isolation due to systemic issues, not inherent limitations, making access to employment a fundamental human right essential for their livelihoods.

Key steps included raising awareness among law enforcers, Disability People's Organizations, and persons with disabilities themselves, while ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. Legislation needed to be comprehensive, accessible, and include penalty clauses to enforce rights. Establishing a robust institutional framework dedicated to upholding these rights was crucial. Additionally, raising awareness through media and educational platforms, ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all spheres, and creating disability directorates within governmental, private, and non-governmental organizations provided targeted support and improved outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Social work implications

The findings indicated that the critical role of social workers in advocating for the employment rights of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia. They raised awareness about these rights, promoted inclusive policies, and worked to ensure the effective implementation of existing laws. By engaging in community education to combat stigma and collaborating with policymakers to establish a comprehensive disability act and a quota system for employment inclusion, social workers drove meaningful change. Additionally, they advocated for tax incentives for employers who hired persons with disabilities, which was considered essential. Empowering individuals through skills training and connecting them with job opportunities helped bridge the gap between disability rights and employment access, fostering socio-economic advancement for persons with disabilities in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

In Ethiopia, where approximately 17.6% of the population had a disability, the protection and advancement of employment rights for persons with disabilities were vital for socio-economic progress. Despite international and national recognition of these rights, significant barriers persisted, with 95% of persons with disabilities living below the poverty line and 60% unemployed. The fragmented nature of disability laws complicated access and implementation, as there was no comprehensive act that consolidated these rights. In contrast, countries like Uganda, Nigeria, and South Africa, which had consolidated laws, demonstrated better protections. Additionally, the absence of a quota system for employment inclusion and tax incentives for employers further hindered opportunities for persons with disabilities. Strengthening legal frameworks and implementing effective measures were considered essential for improving persons with disabilities employment prospects in Ethiopia.

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