

To Work or Not to Work: The Struggle for Employment Among Youth With Disabilities in Brunei

Nurul Nabilah Roslan^{1*}, Nurazzura Mohamad Diah²

¹*Department of Sociology and Anthropology, KIRKHS*

²*International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)*

*Corresponding author. Email: nurulnabilahroslan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Today, employment seems to be the key to almost everything. However, youth with disabilities (YWDs) face harder time finding employment compared to those able-bodied. YWDs are frequently not considered potential members of the workforce. Stigma, fear and prejudice continue to limit understanding and acceptance of disability in workplaces everywhere. Often YWDs ability to work is underrated by many organizations due to their limitations. The aim of this paper is to examine factors that prevent YWDs to venture into employment. Qualitative approach was employed to obtain relevant data. Six YWDs ranging between 19-35 years old were recruited via the snowball sampling technique. All of them completed school more than three years and currently are unemployed. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data. The study highlighted two things: i) limited career opportunities for YWDs and ii) lack of parental support and confidence towards PWDs ability to work still exist. These barriers have prevented YWDs from seeking employment and limited their engagement in the society. Obviously, like the able-bodied youth, YWDs in Brunei have dreams and plans to become successful in life. They believed that they are also an asset to the country. Therefore, they should be groomed to become self-reliant individuals, possess relevant skill set and inspired others to change for the better.

Keywords: *Barriers, brunei, disability, employment, youth, wellbeing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employment is regarded to be important to every individual. By getting employed, a person is not only financially independent but also it enhances social networks and social skills. Unfortunately, opportunities for employments are not enjoyed by some of the individuals especially the disabled people. In comparison to the able-bodied youths and youth with disabilities (YWDs), the YWDs face harder time finding employment. In fact, they are frequently not considered as potential members of the workforce (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2006). According to UN report, 80% to 90% of PWDs of working age in the developing countries are unemployed, whereas in the industrialized countries the figure is between 50% and 70% (United Nations Department of Public Information, 2006). That is more than twice the unemployment rate for people without disabilities.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defined disability as a condition where an individual has impairment since birth or gained it from an accident in which he has to face it throughout his life (World Health Organization, 2011). This impairment has caused the individual to have limitations in performing numerous activities that the abled-bodies can do. In addition, the

limitation for the individual to do any activities as a result of impairment can be in the terms of physical and mental. Individuals who have disability are referred to as People with Disabilities (PWDs). On the other hand, being a part of PWDs also creates barriers since many perceived them as not able to perform duties and this leads to them being underrepresented especially in education and labour market (Shier & Graham, 2009; Wright et al., 2010). Such reaction can also be apparent among youths with disability (YWDs). One of the efforts that can lessen such stereotype is by giving employment opportunities. However, stigma, fear and prejudice continue to restraint the understanding and acceptance of disability in workplaces everywhere.

PWDs IN THE CONTEXT OF BRUNEI

Often PWDs ability to work is underrated by many organizations due to their limitations (Bonaccio et al., 2019). Similar situation is faced by PWDs in Brunei Darussalam. As of in August 2019, the Department of Community Development in Brunei has reported that the number of registered PWDs in Brunei is 7038 (see Figure 1). In terms of gender, males constitute 4,381 while female are 2,628 (see Figure 2). It is reported

during the 14th Legislative Council on Brunei that the number of employed PWDs is only 56 out of 9,282 registered PWDs in 2018 (Hadthiah, 2018). This phenomenon requires in-depth study. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the employment barriers among youth with disabilities (YWDs) in Brunei.

In 2016, Brunei Darussalam had officially ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD). With this step taken, it will assist the people with disabilities to gain more rights and needs. To achieve the *Wawasan Negara 2035* (Nation Vision 2035), Brunei youths are encouraged to be more dynamic and gain

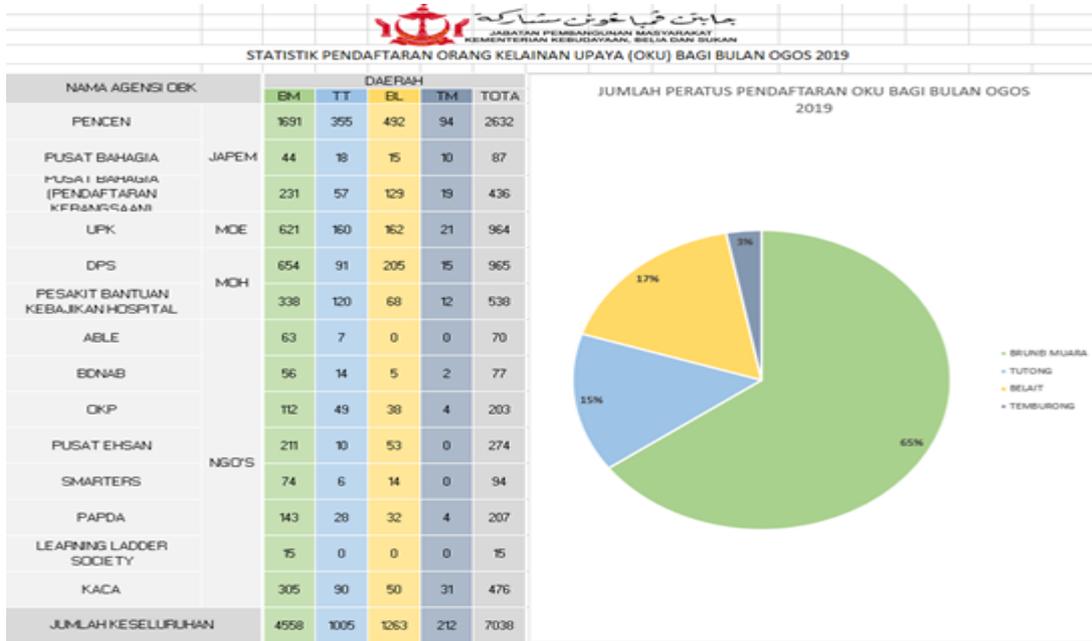
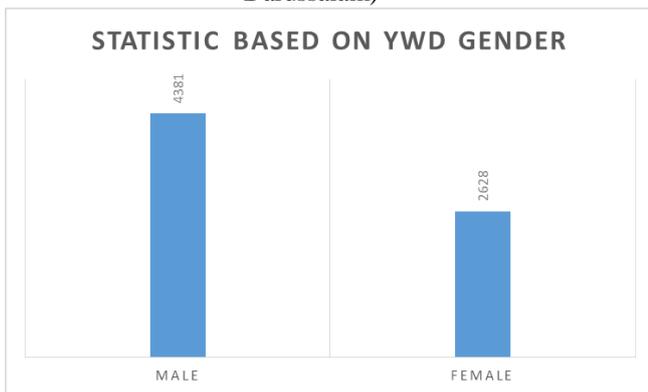


Figure 1. Statistics of Registered Different Abilities as of August 2018

(Source: Department of Community Development, Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sport, Brunei Darussalam)

Figure 2. Statistics of YWD based on gender.

(Source: Department of Community Development, Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sport, Brunei Darussalam)



competencies in order to face challenges especially in job opportunities. Hadthiah (2018) reported that during the proceedings of the 14th Legislative Council in 2017, it was mentioned that only 56 out of 9000 registered disabled people in Brunei were employed. The figure indicates that many disabled people in Brunei are still underemployed. The unemployment issue was not only raised by the government but also some NGOs.

According to Razak (2012), he considered disabled people are not economically active. Such claim is not applicable to every PWDs as some are not eligible in the job sector due to their limited capabilities. However, the Department of Community Development in Brunei recognised the PWDs rights to participate in the labour force (Department of Community Development, 2019). This shows that the government has confidence to engage YWDs as part of the labour force.

In Brunei Darussalam, youths encountered some challenges in getting themselves employed (Rasidah, 2019). Youths in Brunei has the highest percentage of unemployment rate in which for the age group between 15 to 24 years old only 9,644 are unemployed (Labour Force Survey, 2018). Unemployment issues started to gained attention when the number of graduates were not able to get jobs. This is due to the number of limited positions offered in the government sector which cannot accommodate the high number of graduates regardless their qualifications (Saim, 2009; Oum, Asher & Parulian, 2010). As a result, the graduates became unemployed and have shifted their pursuit of careers to the private sector as an alternative.

On the other hand, most studies conducted in Brunei were often focused on the education level where the main concentration was directed to the teachers who teach disabled students. This creates research gap as the concentration should also be given to disabled people too. Bradshaw and Mundia (2005) conducted a study among the undergraduates who were also pre-service teachers from the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD). Their study focuses on how pre-service teachers construct their understanding of disability through interaction with YWDs in their classes. Similarly, Haq and Mundia (2012) study samples were comprised of the undergraduate or pre-service teachers taking psychology of education in UBD. Both have compared the teachers' views and response on the inclusivity of education and the specific disabilities of the students. In another study, Tait and Mundia (2013) explored on the student teachers' competencies in practices after the implementation of inclusive education in Brunei and Hong Kong. In short, less focus is given to study the PWDs themselves.

Interestingly, students who have disabilities in Brunei are not integrated in the mainstream but rather separated in a class called Pre-Vocational. Thus, they are also referred as Pre-Vocational students. In the class, disabled students are combined with different types of disabilities. The Pre-Vocational Programmes in Brunei is to prepare students for their academic skills as well as to develop the necessary skills for employment (Andree & Rohani, 2019). Previous studies on disability in Brunei (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2005; Haq & Mundia, 2012; Tait & Mundia, 2013) are often associated with teachers who are teaching them. The focus of their studies are related to educational challenges, teaching practices and mental health. On the other hand, less research has been done specifically on students with disabilities particularly in relations to their employment opportunities. One study that was conducted among the students was by Lili and Koay (2014) where the samples consisted of students from one Pre-Vocational school in Brunei. This study revealed that Pre-Vocational students have goals they wanted to achieve in future including getting themselves employed. Another study by Abidin and Jaidin (2019) concluded that there are many areas that the YWDs' employability skills need to be enhanced in order for them to be able to compete with the able-bodied. Both teachers and employers also showed that employability skills are equally important with that of academic skills. Furthermore, employers' negative perceptions of the YWDs have also contributed to the low uptake of employment in many sectors.

In 2008, the Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah has introduced the Brunei's *Wawasan Negara 2035* to increase the national economic growth by producing well educated and highly skilled people

(Information Department, Prime Minister Office of Brunei Darussalam, 2017). This vision addresses the needs of both the abled and disabled-bodies. This vision acknowledges the contribution made by both citizens to develop the nation. Some studies such as Razak (2012) have reported that PWDs may not contribute significantly to the nations' economic growth. Such negative view will degrade the image of the disabled community and should be eliminated. The notions and sentiments of exclusion may not be expressed openly in the society but the way YWDs have been treated is a reflection of those sentiments. Despite the awareness, it may generate attentions but rather to make changes, actions and practices should be performed.

Nevertheless, the needs and rights of the PWDs should not be disregarded as they deserve to be given some opportunities to prove that they can also contribute to the government and society. If disability is often associated with the real meaning without looking at the other side of it, then the YWDs have to face challenges to prove the stakeholders otherwise. In general, this research attempts to create awareness of the barriers YWDs have encountered in seeking employment.

2. METHOD

Design of the study

The study was conducted using the qualitative method, specifically semi-structured interview. The researchers selected this particular method in order to help them to gain an in-depth understanding on YWDs unemployment experiences as there is less study concentrated on this vulnerable group. This method is an effective tool to study vulnerable group like the YWDs who is categorized as hidden population due to their hard-to-reach situation (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 203).

Participants

The participants of this research (see Table 1) are male YWDs from Brunei and Muara district. They came from different categories of disabilities: three are paraplegic, two are visually impaired and one is cerebral palsy. Their age is between 18 – 35 years old. All of them had completed their primary school education and passed their *Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (PSR) exam. However, not all of them obtained the first degree. Most of them had at least completed their O-Level and only one had obtained Higher National Diploma. Due to their low education attainment, majority of them had faced difficulty in finding jobs after the completion of their study.

Data Collection Techniques

Unstructured interview was employed to obtain relevant data. The interviews were composed of questions related to YWDs’ experiences and challenges seeking job employment. The participants were asked about their perspective on employment, barriers that they had to face when looking for jobs and their parents support of them in seeking employment. Each of the research questions are also consist of a set of questions that can enhance the answers provided by the participants in order to let the research have an in-depth understanding of the YWDs’ struggles in facing unemployment. The main reason to formulate these questions is to assist the participants to describe their experiences and expression their views and feelings as detail as possible and also to maintain the focus of conversation.

Each interview session lasted between forty minutes to one hour. During the interview, the entire conversation has been recorded and was transcribed. Prior to the interview, research ethics were observed. All participants were informed of the researchers’ intention and they consented to be interviewed. Pseudonyms were used in this paper to protect their privacy. All interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed. This technique helped the researcher to identify similar patterns and themes.

Table 2. Background of research participants

Name	Gender	Age	Diagnosis	Highest Academic Qualification	Period of Unemployment (months)
Hafiz	Male	28	Vision Impairment	Higher National Diploma	10
Irfan	Male	28	Vision Impairment	O-Level	10
Fikri	Male	27	Paraplegic (spinal cord injury)	PMB	8
Hazim	Male	36	Paraplegic (spinal cord injury)	PSR	7
Ahammad	Male	22	Paraplegic	O-Level	5
Qayyum	Male	22	Cerebral Palsy	O-Level	5

Findings

There are two important findings from this study: there is limited career opportunities for YWDs and lack of parental support towards YWDs ability to work.

Limited career opportunities for YWDs

Based on the interviews, majority of the participants showed interests in seeking job employment. They believed that having a job is important. Having a job means they will get their income in order to support themselves and their family members. As highlighted by Fahim who was diagnosed with spinal cord injury:

‘It is very important for my personal and family needs. I want to save money for the future. Also for my daily needs like to buy food and drinks. I want to improve myself. I want to help my siblings and parents’.

Fahim’s response is similar with other respondents. Clearly, their interest to seek employment shows that they wanted to be independent. Despite their limitations, they believed that they are capable to work. Hafiz, who is visually impaired said:

‘For blind people they do not have problem with IQ. It’s just their eyesight. So, there is no excuse for this kind of people to not to have jobs’.

Additionally, due to their disabilities, there are limitations in selecting jobs in which this also became one of their concerns. As each of the participants is under different categories of disabilities, they also shared the same opinion with regards to the types of jobs that are suitable for them. Majority of the respondents have expressed that working in the office is very much suitable and safer for them. Hafiz, visually impaired said:

‘Suitable jobs like operator, filing, IT, sport management anything that is suitable’.

This is also supported by Hazim, who is a paraplegic:

‘Base on what the doctor says, it’s better for me to work in office where a lot of movement is not required’.

However, only Fahim expressed on how he preferred to work outside the office in which he wanted to do jobs that are more hands-on such as carpentry:

‘Not inside office. I want to use my energy. I did a job where I cleaned around the house. I also work at a catering company. It is owned by my friend. I set the table and lift the food’.

Interviewees also pointed out that they also encountered negative perceptions. Due to their abilities, they were attached with labels in which this decreases their marketability and was given less opportunities to show their capabilities. Irfan said:

'An abled-body person does work faster than the disabled-body. We are labeled 'slow'. This limits our opportunities. So, it's the label which make the opportunities limited'.

Aside from the labels, negative perceptions towards them are unavoidable. The respondents believed they can work. However, people around him have put less trust to what they can do. Ahmad said:

'I try to apply job at a bookstore, but people who work there doubt that I can work'.

Majority of the respondents did not know where to find job openings that are specifically for the disabled people. They also mentioned that they have used platforms such as Public Service Commission Recruitment (PSC Recruitment) under government and Jobcentre Brunei to find jobs. Most of the job availability posted in these two websites are very general in which it does not specified if it is also offered to the disabled people. However, most of the jobs may not be suitable for them. Irfan said:

'At Jobcentre Brunei, most of the work does not specified if it is meant for the disabled people or not. It's more general. There are no jobs that are specifically just for the disabled people. This will create inequality because there are also abled-bodies who are also looking for job. But most of the jobs being advertised at Jobcentre are not suitable for us. The opportunities are open for all and we have to compete'.

For Hafiz and Irfan, they voiced another concern in which they mentioned that even if they are accepted for their job application to work in the government, they have to undergo a test using computer. This is challenging for them because the computers are not designed for the visually impaired candidates. Hafiz shared his experience:

'When taking exam for SPA, I need to use the computer. But the thing is, it was not design for people like us and how do we supposed to take the exam?'

Another major obstacle that become the respondents' main demerit is their academic qualification. Although they had shown that they are willing to get employed but aside from their disabilities, academic qualification is another issue. Irfan said:

'The competitions are very stiff. Companies emphasized on academic qualifications. I will have to compete with those who have degrees. I have my O'Level certificate only. On that note, I'm already disqualified'.

The above responses by YWDs about their unemployed condition have shown that getting a job is crucial to sustain their livelihood. In short, negative perceptions about YWDs and low academic qualifications have limited their career opportunities.

Lack of Parental Support

All respondents agree that parental support is indeed very important for them. Parents are their source of motivation in their life. Most of them wanted to repay for the things their parents have done for them. They wanted to contribute in a meaningful way by which they mean giving money to their parents. This is only possible through employment. However, due to their being disabled, facing discrimination, constantly being labelled as incompetent and their parents do not have high hopes and expectations towards them. Although they have tried to convince their parents that they are able to work, their parents understanding about what they can do remain unchanged. Irfan said:

'Every parents want their children to be successful. My parents support and encourage me to participate in NGOs especially helping the blind. They encourage me to do something good. It has good impacts on me and others. But when it comes to work, not so much hope I get from them.'

This is also supported by Ahmad:

'My parents did not expect much and they are worried if I'm working and something bad happen to me if I work in a car workshop'.

Qayyum a cerebral palsy youth said:

'They expected me to have a good result in my O' Level. Actually I failed. Other than that, my parents don't expect much from me. They quite understand of my situation'.

Parents' perceptions about their children getting employed are not in a positive light. Most parents still believed that their children are less capable because of their conditions.

Discussion

The results showed that employment plays an important role in the life of the YWDs. All of them believed that they can contribute significantly to the society. Ismail and Koay (2014) reported that pre-

vocational students have ambitions and goals in life. Although these ambitions and goals may not have materialized, the idea of having a good life and becoming independent in their life exist. YWDs are aware of their rights to become an active members of the society particularly in the labor force. On the other hand, they associated employment with creating awareness of YWDs rights, enhance their social skills and also expand their social networks aside from being financially independent individuals. They believed that employment has many benefits to people like them. They are equally important like the abled-bodies who contribute significantly to the nation's economic growth. Being unemployed person means they are weak and this will enhance more stigma and discrimination in the society.

Competition in seeking employment with the abled-bodies is inevitable. Therefore, the respondents feel that their disabilities should not be the main barriers to get employed as they possessed other skill sets and are willing to learn new things which will help them to be employed. However, there is other significant barriers which hinder them from seeking employment – lacking parental support. As they are all male, they felt that it is their responsible to contribute financially to the family even if they are unmarried. Being unemployed they believed will add more burden to their parents as they have to be dependent most of the time on their family. Nevertheless, most of them are positive about the future. They emphasized that despite their limitations, they still have some basic skills will help them secure a decent job.

Despite showing a strong determination to work, what is lacking most probably is chances to prove their capabilities. Their disabilities should not be the prime factor to be considered as the barrier to work. For the YWDs, what matters the most is their commitment to their jobs. The job inclusivity in Brunei for YWDs is very low and therefore, they have to compete with the abled-bodies who have more potentials and credibility.

Apart from that, parental support for YWDs to seek job employment is less encouraging. Their expectations are low and fear of injury during work is strong. In other words, parents are not convinced that their children will secure a job. This situation is similar with Tait and Mundia (2012) study on parents of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Parents of ASD children has uncertainties about their children's future. They were also concerned that their children might not be able to get a job because of their condition.

It can be seen that the stereotypes, labels and discrimination are dominant in the society (McLaughlin et al., 2004; Shier et al., 2009). The very existence of it had created barriers that may be difficult to break. Although there are some attempts to increase the

employability skills by the Pre-Vocational School in Brunei, unemployment among the YWDs is still apparent. The fact that underemployment is also detected, this shows how the society helped in disabling the opportunities that the YWDs should be granted. Clearly, the CRPD enforcement does not reflects in the crisis that YWDs are facing today.

Finally, this study has several limitations. This study is limited to YWDs who are paraplegic and have impaired vision only. Thus, there should be more research conducted on other categories of disabilities. The case of the YWDs should be explored further with more topics regarding their struggles in order to create awareness and to educate the public. To alleviate the barriers may not be possible if the notions of negative perceptions still revolve around the YWDs. In addition, this study also showed how YWDs have underutilized their skills by staying idle in their homes.

3. CONCLUSION

Obviously, like the able-bodied youth, YWDs in Brunei have dreams and plans to become successful in life. They believed that they are also an asset to the country. The findings of this study give the implications that YWDs should also be exposed with relevant trainings and knowledge that they should gain before leaving school. Most of the respondents hope their future to become much better than their current situation. Voicing out opinions and create awareness to the public may not help to lift the barriers but rather when one action can prove that they can pave the path for the disabled will be much more inspirational. Therefore, they should be groomed to become self-reliant individuals, possess relevant skill set and inspired others to change for the better.

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