

Impact Assessment of a Vocational Training Programme for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a vocational training programme in enabling 261 persons with disabilities to find employment in Bangladesh.*

Methods: *A qualitative method, which employed interviews and focus group discussions, assessed the effect of the training programme on key individual, societal and physical factors set out by the WHO International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001).*

Results: *157 persons with disabilities (60%) secured employment after training. Of these, 74% reported that they were able to provide a better livelihood for their families, 92% reported increased social acceptance, and 83% reported improvement in overall quality of life. Of those who did not find employment, 15% cited issues related to the training course, 6% mentioned discriminatory attitudes of potential employers and 12% had problems related to physical access.*

Conclusions and Implications: *These results suggest that the vocational training programme improved the (re)entry of persons with disabilities into employment, which in turn aided their rehabilitation. However, discriminatory attitudes towards them at the workplace were reported.*

Key words: *disability, vocational training, employment, Bangladesh*

INTRODUCTION

Employment is often seen as an important step towards the rehabilitation and empowerment of a person with disability, because it provides a sense of belonging,

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importance and independence (Department for International Development, 2000). However, persons with disabilities often face many barriers when seeking employment and this is particularly so in Bangladesh, as in other developing countries (Momin, 2004). Despite Government pledges to ensure equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in Bangladesh (Disability Welfare Act, 2001), recent reports suggest that numerous barriers (e.g. discrimination, lack of support, mobility issues) continue to block rights to employment (Asia Pacific Development Centre, 2003; Momin, 2004; Hansen et al, 2007).

Although the actual number of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh is still not known, various reports suggest a figure between 10 and 20 million (Asia Pacific Development Centre, 2003; United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2006). While 50% of the disabilities are preventable, the current Government (GO) and Non-Government (NGO) services in Bangladesh are inadequate, and little is being done to support persons with disabilities to return to work (Hansen et al, 2007). Unequal access to the job market has been reflected in various studies, indicating that many people become unemployed as a direct result of their disability, and are further disadvantaged in consequence (Danish Bilharziasis Laboratory, 2004). Physical disability in particular has been cited as a strong barrier to (re)entering employment in Bangladesh, and negative stereotypes play a significant role (Anam et al, 2002; Momin, 2004). With disability and poverty as both the cause and consequence of each other (DFID, 2000; UNESCO, 2004; Alam et al, 2005), little improvement will be seen until there are effective moves to break the vicious cycle.

The Madhab Memorial Vocational Training Institute (MMVTI), part of the NGO Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed, specialises in the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities through specifically designed vocational training and job placements. Individuals are carefully matched to courses after a full assessment of training needs and suitability, carried out by a multidisciplinary team of doctors, therapists, social workers, counsellors and other professionals, who take into consideration the trainee's physical and financial condition, education, family support, interests, mobility aids, home environment and individual needs.

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the MMVTI programme in readying 261 persons with disabilities for (re)employment. This assessment may be the first of its kind in the country (Hansen et al, 2007), and could be used as the basis for further evaluation and policy development, as there is still much to learn about the role of vocational training and job placement in the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

METHOD

Participants

Overall, 261 persons with disabilities who had taken part in the MMVTI training programme between 1999 and 2009, were selected from five different districts across Bangladesh (see Table 1 for demographics). The physical disabilities of the participants included impairments resulting from a variety of physiological conditions, cosmetic disfigurements, spinal cord dysfunctions, musculoskeletal losses, sensory impairments and various types of chronic diseases. These disabilities had occurred at different times in the participants' lives (e.g. accident, injury, disease or congenital). All the participants were unemployed at the time of joining the vocational training programme.

Table 1: Number and Distribution of Participants and their Demographics

n=261

Variables	Number	Percentage	Family Types		
Districts			'Nuclear'	131	50%
Mymensingh	54	20%	Extended	130	50%
Manikganj	60	23%	Family Size		
Comilla	47	18%	Small (1-4)	94	36%
Gazipur	49	20%	Medium (5-8)	139	53%
Tangail	51	19%	Large (> 9)	28	11%
Sex			Education		
Female	102	39%	Illiterate	22	8%
Male	159	61%	Primary Education	59	23%
Marital Status			Secondary Education (VI- X)	87	33%
Single	132	50%	SSC Pass	44	17%
Married	124	47%	HSC Pass	23	9%
Separated / Divorced/Deserted	5	2%	Higher Education	26	10%

Design

Table 2 shows the number of participants in each MMVTI programme, along with the entry requirements and course duration. Although a multidisciplinary team helped the 261 participants choose their vocational training courses, the final choice was always left to the individual. This study focuses on the five

courses that were favoured by participants (Table 2), but other courses such as poultry rearing and computer graphics were also offered for those with different aspirations.

Table 2: Training Duration and Trades for Different Persons with Disabilities at MMVTI

Course	Number of Persons with Disabilities (n=261)	Entry Requirement	Duration
Computer	67	Minimum SSC	3 months
Electronics	50	VIII	4 months
Garments Operator	9	V	3 months
Shop Management	45	V	1 month
Sewing-Machine Operator	90	V	2 months

Materials and Procedure

Data collection mainly followed a qualitative approach, to get a deeper understanding of the MMVTI programme's impact on participants' lives (e.g. perceived acceptance in society and self-esteem). However, quantitative data were also collected by measuring the impact of the MMVTI programme on irrefutable occurrences (e.g. securing employment). The use of a mixed-methods design served to cross-check the field data and to enhance validity and reliability. The study aimed to elicit views of participants with regard to difficulties associated with finding employment, the effects of finding employment, and the challenges faced in the workplace. Outcomes with regard to physical (e.g. movement-related), individual (e.g. psychological and economic) and societal factors (e.g. support and attitudes) were explored along the general lines of the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001).

The following tools were used to collect data:

General Participant Interviews: A comprehensive questionnaire (formulated in consultation with relevant stakeholders via pilot testing) was used to guide general interviews with all 261 participants.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs took place in 4 of the 5 study areas. Through the FGD more information was gathered from 28 participants who had secured employment.

In-depth Personal Interviews: To supplement the information collected from the FGD in-depth personal interviews were also conducted. Nine of the FGD participants took part in these interviews where information such as individual experiences, history and prevailing dynamics was collected.

Key Informant Interviews: Finally, questionnaire-guided interviews were conducted with 10 key informants (e.g. local leaders, employers, project field staff), to find out more about the impact of the MMVTI programmes on participants' lives, and to cross-check information gained directly from them.

RESULTS

The results are split into 4 sections. The first section contains evaluations of the effect of the MMVTI programmes on subsequent employment rates, and on participants in general. The second section deals with the views of those who did not find employment, and the barriers they faced. The third section considers the views of those who did find employment, and the effect this had on their lives. The last section is a report on the views of those who found employment and the challenges they faced in the workplace.

Effect of the Training Course

Table 3 indicates that 60% of the 261 persons with disabilities (71% of the 102 female participants and 53% of the 159 male participants) found some form of employment after the training (either in the formal labour market or self-employment).

Table 3: Job Status of Persons with Disabilities

n=261

Course	Employed		Unemployed
	Formal	Self-employment	
Sewing-Machine Operator	22 (24%)	36 (40%)	32 (36%)
Shop Management	1 (2%)	23 (51%)	21 (47%)
Electronics	11 (22%)	22 (44%)	17 (34%)
Computer	23 (34%)	10 (15%)	34 (51%)
Garments Operator	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)
Total	64 (25%)	93 (35%)	104 (40%)

The vocational training programme that was considered the most effective was garment-operator training, because all participants managed to find full-time employment (although it must be remembered that the sample size was small). Computer training was considered least effective because the lowest percentage of participants managed to find employment in this area (as a result of which this training course will now be reviewed). Electronics, sewing-machine and shop management training yielded employment rates somewhere in between.

Interestingly, the main reason for the choice of sewing-machine training was because participants felt it could support job placement in both formal and self-employed markets. Computer training was chosen because of the operational suitability to those with a physical disability and a perception of higher demand in this field. Training in electronics and shop management were also favourably considered because of possible self-employment options in the participants' localities.

Overall though, appropriateness of the training (i.e. training that matched the participant's skills, abilities and financial resources) was deemed the best indicator for finding employment. In response to one of the questions in the General Participant Interview, 15% of those who did not find employment after training (23% of the unemployed females and 12% of the unemployed males) stated that the shortcomings of the training programme were at least partly responsible. For example, one participant reported: *"I have received vocational sewing training, but I do not have enough money to buy a sewing machine"*. Therefore, there was a mismatch between this participant's financial resources and the requirements attached to finding self-employment in this area. Similarly, another participant noted: *"I have received vocational computer training. I have applied for a job in various organisations, but I did not get a job because my education background was not strong enough"*. In this instance, there was a mismatch between the participant's educational background and the qualifications required for this line of work.

In addition to studying the effect of the training programmes on subsequent employment rates, it is also worth assessing the generic effects, if any, on those who completed the vocational training course (regardless of employment). All the participants reported that they were motivated to find work after completing their courses, and 69% of the 28 who took part in the Focus Group Discussions reported that the training also helped to establish awareness about disability rights and about government and NGO programmes and support. Most of them reported that they had learnt about disability allowances, identity cards,

seat reservations on buses / trains and disability stipends for students. The training providers (Key Informants) also noted that many of the participants had mentioned increased awareness and self-confidence. This was considered important because, generally speaking, it resulted in more positive attitudes among the persons with disabilities.

To sum up, the MMVTI courses helped 60% of the participants to find employment, and appeared to heighten everybody's motivation to participate in civic society, awareness of disability rights, as well as improve psychological well-being. With regard to gender, the MMVTI courses were more successful in preparing women for employment than men (71% employment of women versus 53% employment of men).

Barriers to Employment

It is a matter of concern that 40% of the 261 participants (29% of the 102 female trainees and 47% of the 159 male trainees) did not manage to find employment. In addition to some of the shortcomings of the training programme noted above (e.g. assigning participants to sewing courses without ensuring they have financial support to buy a sewing machine), other barriers to employment reported in the General Participant Interviews included negative stereotypes held by employers of persons with disabilities and a lack of work opportunities in the community. Overall, 6% of participants who were unsuccessful in finding employment (7% of the unemployed females and 5% of the unemployed males) expressed the opinion that discriminatory attitudes were responsible, and 2% (two unemployed females) stated that there was a lack of opportunities in the community. One of the participants, who mentioned his disability on his CV, shared his experience regarding perceived discrimination: *“Several times I submitted my curriculum vitae against a position matched to my educational background, but the employer never called me for interview”*.

In the General Participant Interviews, 104 persons with disabilities who were unsuccessful in securing employment gave the following reasons for not finding employment even after the training:

- 47% (20% of the 30 unemployed women and 58% of the 74 unemployed men) reported a lack of start-up funds for self-employment.
- 19% (17% of the 30 unemployed women and 19% of the 74 unemployed men) reported that continued unemployment was due to their joining higher studies.

- 16% (37% of the 30 unemployed women and 8% of the 74 unemployed men) reported that they had been discouraged by family members. Each of the women stated that her husband would not allow her to seek employment.
- 10% (13% of the 30 unemployed women and 8% of the 74 unemployed men) reported their deteriorating physical condition to be the cause.
- 2% (3% of the 30 unemployed women and 1% of the 74 unemployed men) attributed continued unemployment to inaccessibility (e.g. not being able to get to the local market using a wheelchair).

To sum up, the main barriers to employment faced by participants in this study were societal discrimination, individual circumstances (e.g. lack of 'start-up' funds) and physical limitations (e.g. worsening health / lack of disability access). With regard to gender, male participants were more likely to state that a lack of start-up funds for self-employment was an issue (58% of men reported this, as compared to 20% of women), and female participants were more likely to say that discouragement from family (mainly husbands) prevented them from finding work (37% of women reported this, as compared to 8% of men).

Effect of Finding Employment

As noted earlier, 60% of the participants (71% of the 102 female trainees and 53% of the 159 male trainees) found employment after undergoing the training programme. The data below reveals the effect this had on their lives.

Economic

The following economic benefits were reported by the 157 participants who succeeded in finding employment:

- 74% of the participants (67% of the 72 employed women, and 81% of the 85 employed men) reported being able to provide a better livelihood for themselves and their families so that basic needs (e.g. food, education, medicine, quality homes and shelter) were guaranteed to be met.
- 64% (44% of the 72 employed women and 81% of the 85 employed men) reported being able to save varying amounts of money in the bank every month.
- 43% (28% of the 72 employed women and 55% of the 85 employed men) reported eating more nutritious food.

- 70% (51% of the 72 employed women and 86% of the 85 employed men) reported being able to repay loans taken out to pay for their treatment, which often incurred high interest rates and created a 'borrowing-nonpayment-borrowing' cycle.
- 46% (42% of the 72 employed women and 49% of the 85 employed men) reported that they are now able to buy assets, medicines, clothing for festivals, toys for the children and even lend money to parents in the village.
- Improvements in sanitation facilities, sources of pure drinking water, use of gas or kerosene stoves in cooking and bedsteads for sleeping were also reported, but there is no specific data related to this.

Two representative statements are as follows:

"Before getting this job, my children had stopped going to school due to economical hardship (although school is free, some families prefer their children to earn money), but after getting this job, my children have started going to school again."

"After fulfilling my basic needs I am able to deposit a fixed amount of money in the bank every month."

Social

Most of the data (unless specified) were gathered from the General Participant Interviews, during which the 157 individuals who had found employment were asked about the changes they had noticed in terms of support and inclusion:

- 83% (67% of the 72 employed women and 96% of the 85 employed men) reported improvement in their overall quality of life in several significant ways, over and above increased financial resources and independence. Having an opportunity to connect with other people was observed as essential, and employment helped most of them to communicate with service providers as 'informed clients'.
- 66% of participants (68% of the 72 employed women and 64% of the 85 employed men) reported that their family members now involved them more in decision making.
- 50% of participants (43% of the 72 employed women and 56% of the 85 employed men) reported feeling more accepted in their families.

- 92% of participants (86% of the 72 employed women and 99% of the 85 employed men) reported feeling more accepted in the community/society.
- 94% of participants (89% of the 72 employed women and 99% of the 85 employed men) reported that they had cast their vote in the elections for the first time since coping with disability. One of the participants was even encouraged to stand for election in his local community.
- In the Focus Group Discussions, all 28 participants agreed that employment enhanced their sense of belonging and identity. Improvement in independence and individual freedom was often related to greater access to financial resources.

Two representative statements are as follows:

"I have a small business in the local market. Every day many people come to my shop and gossip with various issues which help me to know more about the world."

"My family members never took my opinion when they were going to take any initiative in family life, but after getting my job, they always discuss things with me."

Psychological

Most of the data (unless specified) came from questions asked in the General Participant Interviews about changes to participants' perception of life after getting a job. The following psychological improvements were reported by the 157 participants:

- 70% of participants (65% of the 72 employed women and 74% of the 85 employed men) reported that they had overcome tremendous fear and low self-confidence related to employment.
- 26% (21% of the 72 employed women and 31% of the 85 employed men) reported that returning to work had shifted their aspirations, dreams, desires and expectations.
- In the Focus Group Discussions, all 28 participants agreed that employment had enhanced their self-esteem.
- Some participants also mentioned a positive impact on how they viewed themselves in relation to their disability. However, there is no specific data related to this.

Two representative statements are as follows:

“Before I thought I was a burden on society, but now I believe I can do something.”

“Before the training, my hopes were simply to regain some of my life, but now I am planning my whole future with my family and my career.”

To sum up, finding employment had a substantial effect on the individual (e.g. psychological and economic) and societal factors (e.g. social acceptance). It was noted that men were more likely to say that employment had improved their overall quality of life, dreams and expectations, and also helped them feel more confident and accepted within their family and community.

Challenges Faced during Employment

Although many positive results of having found employment are noted, it is important to consider the challenges that persons with disabilities face in the workplace. Of the 28 employed participants who participated in the FGDs (34% of the 24 women and 25% of the 4 men) reported that they experienced negative attitudes from their supervisors or co-workers. In fact, one government official (one of the Key Informants) expressed his negative opinion in the following way:

“From my experience, I never find disabled people productive. Most of the time, disabled people are sick and have a tendency to take sick leave. When I give them a few tasks, they always need extra support.”

Related to this, 33% of the 28 employed participants (21% of the 24 women and 100% of the 4 men) who took part in FGDs also noted that persons with disabilities never enjoy equal status, support or opportunities. One participant reported:

“I have been working here as a sewing helper for more than 3 years, and I have not received any promotion. On the other hand, an able-bodied person gets promoted to sewing operator after 1 year’s experience as a helper.”

Although some employers mentioned that persons with disabilities are given an extra 10-15 minutes for their lunch break (data collected from Key Informants), a number of the In-Depth Interviews with participants revealed that this was often not adequately practiced or stated in policy. Indeed, some participants also reported not being given enough time for cleaning/washing or lavatory usage, and revealed that physical constraints had not always been properly addressed and no additional facilities were provided in the workplace.

To sum up, the main challenges experienced by participants during employment were societal (e.g. negative attitudes) and physical (e.g. lack of provision for disability access). It is not clear from the data whether this affected men and women in the same way.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the MMVTI programme was partially effective in preparing 261 persons with disabilities for (re)employment, over a 10-year period. Overall, 60% of the participants managed to secure some form of employment after the training (formal labour market or self-employment) and, using the ICF guidelines as a broad conceptual framework (WHO, 2001), this seems to have improved individual lives (economically, socially and psychologically) as well as societal attitudes towards them. More male than female participants reported that finding employment had impacted positively on their quality of life and social acceptance. However, the MMVTI programmes were more successful in preparing female participants for employment. Mere participation in the training programme had also yielded positive results, such as the motivation to find work and increased awareness of disability rights.

This study shows that improvements can be made to the lives of Bangladeshi persons with disabilities through vocational training and job placement, and it is therefore suggested that these results should be considered by policy-makers and NGOs. Although vocational training and job placement have been found to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in other countries (Thornton & Lunt, 1997), for the first time these results demonstrate their validity in Bangladesh, and simultaneously add to the growing international evidence.

However, the fact that 40% of the participants failed to find employment after the training programme implies that there is still room for improvement. Some of the qualitative data suggests that a number of participants were sent to training courses that did not suit their needs. This demonstrates the importance of matching participants to the right course at the right time. Some participants reported discrimination as a key factor for their continued unemployment, and data collected throughout this study indicates that even some of those who were successful in finding employment faced discrimination in the workplace. This confirms the conclusion drawn by Tsengu, Brodtkorb and Almnes (2000): "Experience suggests that the majority of persons with disabilities are unemployed and often denied employment opportunities even when they have met necessary

requirements". This also demonstrates that discrimination towards persons with disabilities in Bangladesh extends to the challenge of seeking and maintaining employment (Asia Pacific Development Centre, 2003; Momin, 2004; Hansen et al, 2007).

The limitations of the current study should not be overlooked. For example, though improvement in the quality of life and social acceptance of the vast majority of participants is reported, data reflecting 'by how much' was not collected. There is also no data relating to the time taken for participants to find work after the training, and the duration of the employment they found. The Focus Group Discussions were limited to a small sample size, and while assessing the impact of employment on participants' lives, the researchers were unable to collect comparable data from those who did not find employment. Therefore, the two groups could not be compared or contrasted.

Despite these limitations, this study does indicate that vocational training represents a promising political tool for the (re)employment of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. Although rehabilitation through vocational training and job placement will not be the entire solution, this study maintains that it should be part of it, alongside other schemes such as micro-credit (Thomas, 2000).

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