

**RESEARCH PAPER****Access to Employment Opportunities and Barriers Faced by Blind Females in Pakistan: A Case Study of the Punjab Province****<sup>1</sup> Umer Yaqoob, <sup>2</sup>Zeenat Rana and <sup>3</sup>Bushra Nazeer**

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**Corresponding Author:** umeryaqoob@gcuf.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This paper attempts to explore the barriers faced by the blind females regarding their access to employment opportunities. There has been given the description of the hurdles which the blind females come across in the province of Punjab while searching and doing some job. In this regard the issues like gender gap, limited job opportunities, negative attitude, lack of gender and disability sensitivity among the employers, lack of transport and residential facilities, sexual harassment at job place, etc are indispensable to mention. For said purpose a sample of forty blind females, age ranging from 20-50 years with a mean age of 30 years was collected from the different parts of Punjab by using purposive and snow ball sampling techniques. While in-depth interviews were conducted in 2024 and extracts from these case studies have been mentioned in this paper to substantiate the argument.

**KEYWORDS** Barriers, Employment, Blind Women, Job Opportunities, Gender Discrimination, Persons with Disabilities**Introduction**

This paper provides an overview of the life experiences of blind females living in province of Punjab, Pakistan. It aims to analyze the major accessibility barriers faced by blind females in their daily life experiences with special reference to their access to employment opportunities. From the last couple of decades Pakistan is facing a grave economic crisis which has resulted into the deteriorating economic growth. The key economic indicators show the feeble conditions of Pakistan's economy. For example, low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate, high percentage of inflation, low Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), increasing poverty, energy shortfall and high rate of unemployment have exacerbated the situation (Yaqub, 2011). Among these economic problems faced by Pakistan at present, unemployment is the real matter of concern because it gives birth to many other socio-economic problems. For instance, increase in the number of dependent population, brain drain, criminal activities and poverty. The unemployment rate rose in 1990s which continues till present. It was highest as 8.3% in 2004 (Cheema & Atta, 2011). Similarly, the unemployment is at a rise in the province of Punjab as it is experiencing an increase in unemployment rate from last few years. For example, the unemployment rate in Punjab in 2011-12 was 5.7% which increased to 6.1% in 2012-13 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Moreover, all segments of society are not equally affected by the unemployment issues rather some groups of society are confronted with more barriers in the way of access to employment opportunities. In this regard women and persons with disabilities PWDs are vital to mention.

## Gender Gap in Employment

Another major issue regarding employment in Punjab is a huge gender gap due to which the female folk experience much lesser labor force participation rate than their male counterparts. For example, in Punjab "only 9.46 million females were in the labor force compared to 24.9 million males in 2020-21 (International Labor Organization, 2023). Moreover, the majority of women in Punjab confront a great number of socio-cultural problems within the household and society which restrain their access to gainful employment while their productive potential remains unutilized. This low female participation in economic activities results into the low economic autonomy, limited mobility of the females and also increases their dependency level on their male counterparts (Isran & Isran, 2012).

Likewise, many studies regarding female paid work show that most of the times women face unfavorable environment, limited employment opportunities, low wages, inadequate work conditions and double burden of work due to domestic duties. Similarly, in some instances they confront gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work places which sometimes make it difficult for them to continue their labor (Khan, 2015).

## Unemployment and Persons with Disabilities PWDs

Moreover, another part of population which is strongly affected by unemployment issue is PWDs because many studies suggest that PWDs are more likely to be out of work than their non-disabled counterparts. They are often employed in low status and poorly paid work. Similarly, many people with disabilities are not employed but they want to work (Roulstone, 2004). Moreover "disability creates and exacerbates poverty by increasing isolation and economic strain, not just for the individual but for the family: there is little doubt that disabled people are among the poorest in poor countries" (Stone, 2001).

In the same manner, these challenges are also confronted by PWDs in Punjab regarding employment opportunities. There are no reliable statistics available regarding employment rate of PWDs in Punjab. Moreover, many studies show that the "disabled people are frequently denied the opportunity to work because of assumptions about their productivity, interest, reliability or suitability as workers". (Barnes, 2000). There are many barriers which PWDs come across while entering employment. For example, negative attitudes towards hiring persons with disabilities, lack of trust regarding abilities of PWDs among employers, infrastructural barriers like lack of accessible transport, ramps, accessible restrooms etc. Similarly, in many instances lack of assistive devices at work place also make it difficult for PWDs to carry out their work (British Council & Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014).

In addition, the law exists in Pakistan regarding employment of PWDs under the title Disabled Persons (Employment & Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981 which initially provided 1% quota in all public and private jobs for PWDs later it increased from 1% to 2%. But there are many defects in this law due to which it lacks its significance. For example, the organizations which do not follow the employment quota scheme have to pay 2000 rupees per month per person to the National Council for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (NCRDP) or Provincial Council for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (PCRDP). Through this relaxation this law gives escape to the employers so they pay this meager amount to NCRDP instead of employing the PWDs in their

organizations (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2002). Recently the government of Punjab amended this law and has increased the disabled job quota from 2% to 3% in 2015 (Punjab Disabled persons (Employment and rehabilitation) Amendment Act, 2015). However, it is not enough to meet the employment needs of PWDs because their proportion in population is much higher than 3% as according to the World Health Organization WHO statistics the proportion of disabled population in Pakistan is about 10% (World Health Organization, 2011).

### Blind Females and Unemployment

Moreover, blind females are in catch twenty-two situation whereas on one hand they are facing gender discrimination and on the other hand they are marginalized on the basis of their disability. "Disabled women are less likely to be in the paid workforce than either men with disabilities or non-disabled women and in general have lower incomes from employment" (Meekosha, 2006). "In many developing nations, conditions for Women with Disabilities (WWDs) are worse than for disabled men - both generally and specifically with regard to economic self - sufficiency because of legal and cultural limitations on their right and ability to participate in the labor force, such women also have much less earning power throughout their life span (Schriner, 2000)". To explore this phenomenon and to have a profound understanding of the barriers faced by the blind females in the province of Punjab a sample of forty blind females, age ranging from 20-50 years with a mean age of 30 years was collected from the different parts of Punjab by using purposive and snow ball sampling techniques. While in-depth interviews were conducted in 2024. We used their pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Ironically statistics of this research show a very gloomy picture regarding the employment of blind females in Punjab. Out of 40 respondents only 6 (15%) were employed while 34 (85%) respondents were unemployed which clearly reveals that the blind females enjoy very low employment opportunities in Punjab. To add some more substance to the argument here is presented the empirical data from the three leading institutions of the blind persons with respect to employment in Punjab.

### Material and Methods

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**Table 1**  
**Blind Employment**

Institutions	Total Employed Blind	Males	Females
Government Qandeel School for the Blind, Rawalpindi	13	10	03
Government Sheranwala School for the Blind, Lahore	20	19	01
Government Secondary School for the Blind, Bahawalpur	21	21	00

Shafeeq et al. (2024).

These statistics show that in these three institutions for the blind in Punjab there are 50 blind males employed whereas in these three institutions the number of blind females is only 4 which is equal to 8% of their male counterparts. In this way blind males evidently outnumbered the blind females in employment. Hence the blind females in Punjab face a huge number of problems regarding employment i-e in getting and continuing their jobs. Some of these imperative barriers are discussed in detail under the headings mentioned below:

### **Limited Job Opportunities for Blind Females**

Throughout this research data reveals that blind females enjoy very limited job opportunities in Punjab and are mostly employed in regular education and special education sector as teachers and braille trainers. On the other hand, men with blindness are quite found in some other employment sectors. For example, they do work as music composers, cane workers, telephone operators, factory workers, clerks and lawyers etc. Many respondents of this research are of the opinion that it is very hard for blind females to get a job in any other organization except educational institutions and if ever they get a chance, they don't get permission from their families to avail that opportunity.

Ms. Khalida who has done bachelors in law (LLB) from a renowned university said that she is not practicing law at present but she did practice law for some time. On asking the reason for not practicing law now she articulated that "when I started practicing law I had to go to the city court, Lahore at that time my father was not alive and of course my mother was the head of our family. Once she went with me to the city court and she did not like the environment over there because that city court is a very crowded place with very few females working there. Secondly, I did not own my personal office so I used to share my office with one of my male colleague. So, she did not allow me to continue my practice of law and very strictly asked me to leave that because my mother thinks that being a blind female it was not safe for me to practice law with a lot of males over there" (Khalida, 2024).

### **Negative Attitude among Employers Regarding Blind Females**

Most of the times unfavorable attitudes among the employers regarding PWDs can be observed which are more visible in the public sector. Here is presented an excerpt from a study of Shaheen Sardar Ali the former Provincial Minister of Health and Social Welfare in North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and I quote at length:

"I sensed a certain reluctance, bordering on sullen resistance and suspicion, on the part of employees in the various ministries when engaging with disabled persons. This reluctance extended to impeding access to me, especially when the request to meet was repetitive. Under the breath muttering of 'Oh my God, here they are again! ' and 'Now what?', as well as snippets of conversation, suggested the impatience and a sense of what society was thinking of disabled persons" (Ali, 2007). This negative behavior is also experienced by some of the respondents of this research in Punjab.

Ms. Rida shared that "it took almost two years after the completion of my studies to search a job. The experience of searching job was the hardest time of my life. I and my sister who is also blind used to go with our father and visited various educational institutions of both public and private sector for getting some job as teachers. But mostly the people in different institutions in Punjab especially in special education department tried to avoid us and created hindrances for us to meet the higher authorities. We also

tried to meet the Provincial Minister of Social Welfare and Special Education twice or thrice but could not gain any success. This negative attitude was indeed very hurting and discouraging for me and my sister (Rida, 2024)."

### **Lack of Gender and Disability Sensitivity among the Employers**

The empirical data of this research reveals this fact that mostly the employers and the hiring agencies do not take into account the gender and disability perspectives and also lack the sensitivity regarding these issues. For example, they sometimes offer a job to women with blindness far away from the place of their residence like in some other city. This particular act of the employers discourages most of the blind females to accept that specific job and often becomes a hurdle for them to grab that opportunity. A case study mentioned below makes this problem understandable in depth.

Ms. Sana who is working in Rawalpindi at present got her first posting in district Gujrat where she worked for one year. On inquiring about managing her job in Gujrat which is quite far from Rawalpindi she said that "I and my sister who is also blind were in search of a job for almost two years. At last when we were selected in Punjab Special Education Department as senior teachers in Basic Pay scale (BPS-17) we were given no other option except to join in district Gujrat or simply refuse that job. As we did not have any other choice, we agreed to do that job but that proved to be a very tough decision because we spent very difficult time of our lives during that job. We faced a lot of problems there but the major one was of course that we both were blind so we needed someone all the time to accompany us. Therefore, one of our family members always had to stay with us sometimes our mother, sometimes our father or brother etc (Sana, 2024).

### **Under Employment**

At first blind females face high unemployment and secondly those who enter in the job market are often under employed. Most of the times they are employed on the positions for which they are over qualified. Whereas in many cases they receive the job offers for the positions utilizing less than the optimum qualification and abilities of the women with blindness. Moreover, they are frequently under paid as well (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2004). This fact is very much observed during this research.

Ms. Jaweria who is working as a braillist in (BPS-11) said that she is not fully satisfied with her current job. On asking the reason she told that "I am not satisfied with my job because I am over qualified and this job is not according to my qualification. I have done post-graduation which makes me eligible for the post of senior teacher having Basic Pay Scale (BPS-17) but I am working as a braillist who has Basic Pay Scale (BPS-11) and it is also less paid as compared to the senior teacher's post. I also applied for the post of senior teacher but was not able to get that job because unfortunately in special education department there is only 2% quota for the disabled. Although this department has schools for disabled but due to this very limited quota I was not selected therefore, I applied for the job of braillist (Jaweria, 2024)".

### **Lack of Transport and Residential Facilities at Job Place**

This is another significant barrier to which the blind females come across. The blind females face the problems of the lack of adequate transportation and residence from their employers in acquiring jobs which proves to be a discouraging factor and great barrier for women with blindness to avail the available job opportunities (Tuttle & Tuttle,

2004). This phenomenon is quite evident in this research as the three major institutions for the blind in Rawalpindi, Lahore and Bahawalpur do not offer any residential or transportation facilities to their female employees.

Ms. Ayesha who is teaching in a Government school told that "I have to face many problems in doing my job however one of the most important barrier is the absence of transportation facility due to which I have hired my personal taxi which drops and picks me up from my job place therefore I have to spend a reasonable amount on my transportation which increases my expenditures too. Although I get the transportation allowance in my pay but it is very little amount and the fare of my hired taxi is three to four times higher than the amount I get as a transport allowance (Ayesha, 2024).

The similar case regarding problem of transport facility was confronted by Ms. Rida who lives in Gujar Khan and is working in Qandeel Special Education School for the Blind, Rawalpindi. She told that she is also facing problems in doing her job because her school does not provide any transport facility to the employees so that is why she has to manage it on her own. She has hired a private taxi for pick and drop service but it is very expensive for her because her school is quite far from her house (Rida, 2024).

### **Sexual Harassment at Job Place**

Many studies show that often women with blindness are confronted with the acts of sexual harassment at their work places due to which sometimes they decide to leave their jobs. These incidences of sexual harassment and abuse also leave very negative psychological effects which lead the blind females to depression and insecurities. This fear of sexual harassment ultimately influences the working potential of the women with blindness as well (Habib, 1997).

Regarding this issue Ms. Maryam who is working in a braille press as a braillist told that in her office her all colleagues are males and she was the only female there so most of the times she got disturbed due to the indecent attitude of her colleagues. On further inquiring she shared that "as I am blind and divorced also my colleagues often try to approach me and want favors from me. Once one of my colleagues helped me to do a certain task related to my job duty and when I thanked him in return, he asked me to give him favor and when I asked him do you want some monetary favor he replied no I am talking about some sexual favors. I also talked to my high ups about this behavior of my colleague but they did not consider it a serious issue neither they took any substantial action against him rather they suggested me to marry again or to leave that job. So, it was very difficult for me to leave that job or to marry again as it is not at all an easy task for a blind woman to get a suitable spouse or a good job (Maryam, 2024)".

### **Lack of Assistive Devices at Work Place**

The lack of assistive devices for example talking soft wares in computers, scanners and braille writing machines etc at work place also proves to be major barrier for women with blindness in performing their work to full of their potentials at their job places. It also affects their efficiency and makes them dependent on their male counterparts for doing even small things like reading a piece of paper or writing an application for them.

On asking the problem of lack of assistive devices at work place Ms. Hafsa articulated that "the major problem I face during my work is the lack of assistive devices

in my organization for example talking soft wares in computers, with printers and scanners. This is why for each and every thing I need the help of my colleagues which makes me feel dependent upon others. Plus, my peers show very negative attitudes towards me and my other blind fellows. For instance, my peers often try to avoid me because they think I may ask them for help like whenever they see me with papers in my hand they try to escape quietly from that place and sometimes I also feel this act of them by hearing their voice etc (Hafsa, 2024)".

### **Lack of Job Training and Skill Development**

This study also reveals the fact that blind females do not receive any job training and no special programs are arranged by governmental and non-governmental organizations for their skills development. However, if ever any training or skills development course is organized for persons with disabilities it includes very small number of women with blindness due to lack of transportation and residential facilities.

On asking about ever attending any job training or some course of skill development for example computer usage, telephone operating etc. Ms. Imrana stated "no, I have never attended any such program once I came to know that a computer training course was organized but that was in some other city and they were not providing any residential facilities so that is why I could not participate in that course (Imrana, 2024)."

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that the empirical data of this research clearly shows that in Punjab blind females face enormous barriers in the way of access to employment. On one hand they have very limited job opportunities which are mostly belonged to educational sector only while women with blindness are not considered suitable for office jobs. On the other hand, negative attitude of the employers proves to be a hurdle in the way of gainful employment because being blind females sometimes it becomes quite impossible for them to visit different offices again and again in search of job.

Moreover, employment agencies and organizations are mostly not gender and disability sensitive therefore sometimes they offer that kind of opportunity to the blind females which is very hard to accept. For instance, job in some other city or job without transportation and residential facilities. Likewise, women with blindness are often under employed or are often over qualified for a job. Due to this reason they not only get less income but also feel low self-esteem as they have to do certain jobs which are much less paid than their eligibility and qualification. In addition, sexual harassment at work place also increases the vulnerability of blind females because due to the incidences of sexual harassment they feel insecure which ultimately effects their performance and efficiency. Sometimes they have to tolerate that behavior because it is very difficult for them to search another job.

Similarly, lack of transportation and residential facilities act as a significant barrier for women with blindness to get a suitable job for them because sometimes arranging special transport or hiring a residence is not an economically viable option for them. Furthermore, lack of assistive devices and gadgets at work place increase the problems of blind females because it makes simple tasks difficult to do which make them dependent on their colleagues and sometimes they have to depend on their male

colleagues in the absence of female colleagues which gives them a feeling of dependency on others.

Lastly, the lack of job training and skill development increase the magnitude of their problems as many times the blind females get some opportunity but could not avail that because they are not well trained in that specific area. For example, computer usage, telephone operating or mobility instructor etc. Hence in the nutshell women with blindness in Punjab are confronted by a significant number of barriers in the way of employment which not only increase their economic dependency but also affect their self-esteem.

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