

Mainstreaming Disability in the Workplace in Myanmar: Preliminary Study Findings

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ABSTRACT

International businesses have been under pressure to consider inclusive workplace practices and mainstream the disability agenda. After decades of isolation as Myanmar slowly opens itself to the world, global businesses making their inroads into the country are poised with several challenges in addressing the agenda of people with disabilities (PWD) in the workplace in Myanmar. This article reports the preliminary study findings of a qualitative study of business professionals, as well as civil society members including PWD, based in the business capital city of Yangon, to examine the various business impediments in their engagement with disabled people in the workplace. The preliminary findings indicate three barriers for businesses in engaging with the issue of disabilities. These are restricted business understandings, a weak social model of disability, nascent management approaches, and an absence of skills and resources for PWD. The study indicates that in the absence of strong public policies and a regulatory environment, voluntary business participation through stakeholder engagement with the government and PWD is an essential way forward for businesses to facilitate disability mainstreaming in the workplace in Myanmar.

Keywords: Business, disability, Myanmar, people with disabilities, workplace

INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities (PWD), along with other groups such as the elderly, share the social perception and position of being marginalized people (Yoon et al., 2017). The consideration of disabilities and PWD, in particular, is an emergent issue in most developing Asian economies, yet the integration of people with disabilities

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(PWD) in the workplace has increasingly garnered interest in Asia. Myanmar, a country with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, which continues to remain in a state of political and economic transition, reported 4.6% of its population (2.3 million people) as PWD (Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population, 2015). As Myanmar opens itself to domestic and international business, its participation in creating an inclusive workplace to facilitate disability mainstreaming and the various business impediments faced by businesses form an important area of study. This study offers useful implications for businesses, society, and the government in their attempts to mainstream disabilities in the workplace.

Literature Review

Businesses in Myanmar: Joining the Global Platform. After decades of military rule, in recent times the Republic of the Union Myanmar has opened itself to the outside world, ending its several decades of isolation with the global community. Myanmar's new government has encouraged a suitable business climate and welcomed international businesses over the last five years. In recent times, the changes in the new company laws (Myanmar Company Law, 2017) are expected to increase international investment interest (Oxford Business Group, 2020). Furthermore, with factors like the lifting of sanctions by the USA, Myanmar's active participation in the ASEAN economic community, as well as a steady rise in local consumption and

increased public spending, Myanmar is attempting to position itself as a business preferred ASEAN destination for the global investment community.

However, amidst the ongoing international concerns of Myanmar's domestic stability, the optimistic global investment community has continued to seek a guarded advantage of the economic situation. At present, the development of domestic and international businesses as an outcome of Myanmar's political and economic transitions remains deeply dependent on the future development of the four essential stocks of the country's physical, human, institutional, and social capital (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013).

In the context of an emergent changing business scenario, the notion of conducting a responsible business is also a developing concept in Myanmar. While the traditional philanthropy, charity, and foundation-based approach continue to be popular, the strategic understanding of CSR and the facilitator role of bodies like the Union of Myanmar Federation of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) is still not widely known. The governance and environmental dimensions of businesses have been concerned with issues of transparency, combating corruption, and efforts to prevent environmental exploitation. The social dimension shows a preference for human rights issues and those related to workplace engagement. However, there is evidence of very little research in this area.

Disabilities in Myanmar

Disabilities in the workplace and its conceptualization within the framework of labour is a new concept in Myanmar. The first formal documentation of PWD in the country was carried out only as late as 2008/2009. For a much longer time, PWD has been the 'hidden society' in Myanmar. In recent times, Myanmar has undertaken several regulatory initiatives to promote disability-inclusive developments. These include the ratification of the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2011) and the Law of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Government of Myanmar (2015), and the formation of the National Committee on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (NCPRD). The country is also committed to the Bali Declaration on the Enhancement of the Role and Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the ASEAN Community and Mobilization Framework of the ASEAN Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2011-2020), a signatory for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2013-2022) with a commitment to the 2012 Incheon Strategy, a disability-inclusive post-2015 development agenda (Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population, 2017).

The civil society committed to issues of PWD in Myanmar is an active group of stakeholders pursuing the issue through cross-functional efforts of disability service providers (DSPs), disabled people's organizations (DPOs), and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs). These organizations attempt to address an array of issues such as advocacy, education, vocational training, skill-building, employment, mobility, and independent living concerns.

Stakeholder Theory. The stakeholder theory, with an expansive view, positions itself in contrast to the shareholder theory, with the fundamental assumption that corporations are socially responsible entities which have obligations towards the society. The theory beyond the philosophical assumptions of CSR is within the realm of management. Freeman (1984), the principal architect of this approach, defined stakeholders 'as any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement of the organization's objectives'. The shareholder is repositioned as one of the stakeholders within a larger set of stakeholders, and the bidirectional relationship which the company previously shared with the shareholder alone is also extended to other members of the stakeholder group. In the context of this study, this is a useful lens as businesses in Myanmar are trying to conceptualize the position of people with disabilities as employee stakeholders who have tried to gain a voice and increasingly demanded to the mainstream through economic and social participation. Additionally, the stakeholder approach also positions the government and the disability-focused civil society, as stakeholders for business, in mainstreaming the disability agenda in Myanmar.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The key research question of this paper was to examine and identify the key barriers to business participation in mainstreaming the disability agenda in the workplace in Myanmar. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the study engaged in purposive sampling, with the intent to understand the various issues underpinning the research objective. The sampling objective was guided by the need to learn ‘a great deal about the issues’ (Coyne, 1997). The methods employed for the data collection were semi-structured, in-depth interviews and document analysis. For the aforesaid purpose, businesses and civil society were both parts of the direct sample while government documents were referred to for document analyses.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted. The study entailed engagement with a total of 4 businesses and 3 disability NGOs/DPOs. The data was exclusively collected from businesses and civil society located near or with the head office in Yangon. The interviews with businesses included professionals who are responsible for the diversity initiative in the company and are presently driving the same or shortly expected to lead the initiative. For the NGOs and DPOs, all the interviews were conducted with the key members such as the founders or leadership team.

Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews

All the interviews were on-site, and audio recorded. The interviewer was accompanied by a language translator, given that Burmese

is the preferred language of discussion. All the interviewees were coded, and interviews were translated and transcribed. All interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews. Codes and themes from the research findings were developed from the line-by-line reading of the transcripts. The thematic analysis was aided by the engagement with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo (Version 10).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The early study findings indicate three impediments for mainstreaming disabilities in the workplace and its conceptualization of PWD as employee stakeholders in Myanmar.

Restricted Business Understanding of Disabilities and Weak Social Model of Disability

The findings of this study indicate that the business interpretation of disabilities and challenges of PWD in Myanmar are limited, and the sub-classifications are restricted to those with physical or visual or auditory impairments. The expansion of the term ‘disability’ now includes intellectual, sensory, and long-term illnesses which have a disabling impact, and account for PWD with a wide range of disabilities. However, the study findings show that Myanmar businesses prefer the narrow definition of a disability. Businesses cite several reasons for their preferred engagement with physical, visual, or auditory impairments. For example, businesses are at the very

early stages of engagement with disabilities in the workplace and therefore remain more comfortable with traditional types of disabilities, such as hearing impairments, speech impairments, mobility issues, and visual impairments.

We have worked with people who have leg problems, amputees or those from childhood who cannot walk, or in wheelchairs. We have not faced any problem with them. But I am not sure if we are equipped to understand the challenges of those who have other challenges which are internal and impact their disabilities. (Respondent 1.1)

Furthermore, businesses have a weak understanding of intellectual or other forms of disabilities. They are also unprepared to address the challenges or offer suitable accommodations which include people with intellectual disabilities or those who have functional limitations because of the disabling impact of a long-term illness like chronic diabetes, leprosy, HIV, a psychological issue, or those related with the ageing process. Going ahead, this can be a challenge for businesses. For example, the 2010 report of the Myanmar National Disability Survey showed that in the working-age group of 16-65 years old, and the school-age group of 6-15 years old, “the proportion of persons with a disability due to an intellectual disorder is the highest” (Department of Social Welfare and the Leprosy Mission International, 2010). It is useful to note here that Myanmar for a

long time has recognized the significance of mental healthcare, with services and support available as early as 1928 (James, 2005).

We need to think as to what roles and functions we can create for a suitable job for others [those with an intellectual disability].
(Respondent 3.1)

Businesses in Myanmar need to adopt an expanded understanding of disabilities and PWD. In addition to physical and sensory disabilities, or those acquired at birth, businesses in Myanmar also need to account for intellectual disabilities and the disabling impact of long-term illnesses. In doing so, they will be able to reach out to a larger pool of potential employee stakeholders with disabilities and build upon the existing resources available within the country, which supports disability.

Emergent HR Practices and Nascent Modern Management Approaches

Most of the private businesses in Myanmar are now experiencing a new business climate, given the business needs to boost their productivity and enhance their people, processes, and product efficiency. To assert their positions in an increasingly competitive market, businesses are considering several measures such as transparency issues, labour laws, the impact of an influx of international partners, foreign employees, the challenges of skilled labour, the lack of capital, and access to finance amongst others (PWC, 2017).

In line with global trends, the shifting business culture in Myanmar is also coming to terms with designing a work environment and processes to adjust to new workplace demographics, issues of people efficiency, and the development of global competencies to operate within larger frames of futuristic and dynamic organizational strategies. Many of the sophisticated processes of modern HR practices for businesses in Myanmar are at very early stages of development.

Our people processes are very nascent, for example, the payroll. Until recently, people were paid their full salaries in cash. There were no bank accounts. And there continues to be little trust, so many people withdraw their full salaries on the first day itself. Things still work in the old way, since relationships, contacts, and personal networks are very important. We are moving but the speed is slow. (Respondent 2.1)

With businesses which are subsidiaries of international corporations, there remains both gaps and challenges in the transfer of global best practices, given the institutional and local constraints. For example, organization-wide job descriptions and the mapping of all organizational roles are an emergent initiative.

Traditionally, there were no job descriptions. Once you entered a company, you did whatever you were asked to do. There was no clear difference between my responsibility and your responsibility. (Respondent 1.8)

The employee stakeholder relationship is at a nascent stage in Myanmar, and businesses largely remain comfortable dealing with homogenous employee groups. It is in this background that mainstreaming the disability agenda, in the absence of developed organizational systems and culture emerges as a challenge for businesses in Myanmar. At present, there is little consensus in terms of the organizational design and other support for the successful integration and implementation of the disability initiative by businesses. Within organizations, businesses will need to cross embed the issue through resource allocation, do internal organizational climate building, as well as design suitable policies and processes with the long-term intent of mainstreaming disabilities through workplace initiatives. This means developing partnerships with internal stakeholders such as employees and suppliers. There is also scope for businesses engaging in a sectoral approach, for example, the banking industry and PWD, which will allow for building industry-specific skills or developing industry-wide governing codes for better participation for PWD in the workplace.

‘Elusive’ Skills, Talents, and PWD Resources

In Myanmar, despite the high engagement of the population in the workforce, there is a serious problem related to skill mismatches, the brain drain of the skilled workforce, and the existing gap between the current education system and skill demands as the country undertakes its modernization

journey. The subject of skill-building challenges for PWD are further complex given that only 15% of PWD are engaged with the workforce with nearly 50% of them never having had a livelihood (OECD, 2015).

Choudhury-Kaul's (2015) study of PWD employees in Indian companies showed that the issue of missing employees with disabilities and their relevant skills in the workplace was intrinsically linked to the issue of the missing or absent population of children with disabilities in school. The situation is quite similar in Myanmar. The scope of primary and secondary education for children with disabilities in Myanmar remains very low. A United Nation Children's Health [UNICEF] (2016) study highlights the role of the family and those of mothers as the central caregivers, restricted options of education and proper health care, and the lack of a suitable environment and mainstream sensitization for children with disabilities. These factors prevent the social inclusion of children with disabilities and deeply affect their prospects of skill-building and mainstreaming labour market participation as adults in formal sectors leading to setbacks of their earning capacity.

Many of our children who have some have disabilities ... There is very little accommodation when the child is a slow learner ... The classroom will be on the first floor, while the toilet and water drinking taps are on the ground floor.
(Respondent 6.1)

The business preparedness for mainstreaming disabilities at the workplace remains low in Myanmar. Businesses remain besieged with the concerns of locating suitable candidates who can transition as employees and be offered gainful employment. One of the questions the businesses are asking is where they can locate a pool of skilled and talented employees with disabilities in the first place. The present situation is an outcome of years of neglect of education and skill-building for children and youths with disabilities in Myanmar. Furthermore, businesses at present remain sceptical of the expected costs of disability accommodation and the retaining of PWDs as long-term organizational employees given the weak social model of disability in Myanmar.

To work in the banking sector, our employees need to be at least a university graduate ... but we have only one person who is an accountant who has formal qualifications ... we have struggled to find suitably qualified PWD.
(Respondent 3.1)

The civil society and the DPOs having realized the aforesaid challenges, in recent times have launched programs and projects which are intended towards enhancing the skills of the PWD and working towards engaging with the business sector. The Shwee Mintha Foundation, for example, as one of the DPOs at the forefront of Myanmar's Disability Rights movement, actively engages in the advocacy of the right to employment and access to work

opportunities for PWD at local and national levels mainly in central and western Myanmar.

The vocational skills offered to PWD through vocational centres fall short of the market demand and skill expectations. A challenge that these skill centres face is that many of the students have never been to school previously or are school dropouts. The centres in their interactions with private businesses note that many of them do not have any previous experiences in dealing with PWD employees or have very little interest in engaging with PWD as employees. Another challenge is that the deskilling of skilled PWD resources, who despite having a higher level of training and certification, may end up making them do very basic roles.

For private companies which do not have much experience with employing PWD, they do not know about the disabilities and they do not know about the rights of the persons with disabilities. Then we try to explain [to them] about persons with disabilities. Some employers refuse to hear more explanations, but some are interested. But it is like sympathy, like a charity. (Respondent 5.1)

The business outlook towards the subject of disability must remain futuristic. This means that business participation is not only limited to being concerned about the present-day employment of PWD but also understanding the current skill gaps and playing a role in designing suitable

solutions. For example, businesses through their CSR approach may effectively engage with educating and training PWD through state partnership programs or independent initiatives at primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels. Several businesses are already engaged in skill-building initiatives through establishing short-term programs and setting up training institutions to address the current skill shortages in the country. These programs can be adapted to enhance the work readiness of PWD. Businesses may also seek to participate in the better implementation of a social model of disabilities by steering accessibility initiatives at regional and national levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Businesses in Myanmar are going through a transition period. As businesses adapt to new world expectations of their roles in society, they are under increasing pressure to reexamine their positions as economic institutions in the context of social, governance, and environmental expectations from multiple domestic and international stakeholders. In such a situation, a proactive business approach to mainstream disabilities and PWD in the workplace will offer a pole position advantage to early adopters. This study recommends three key drivers of voluntary business participation in mainstreaming the disability agenda in the workplace in Myanmar, which seeks to explain the reasons for business engagement with disabilities and what businesses can do to voluntarily mainstream disabilities in the workplace in Myanmar.

Adopt an Expanded Definition of Disabilities and Embed Disability Initiatives in the Workplace for Business Readiness

Businesses in Myanmar would greatly benefit by adopting an expanded definition of disabilities inclusive of intellectual disabilities and those that are acquired later in life or because of the long-term impact of diseases (as per the UNCRPD and government). This will allow for businesses to harness a larger and better work-ready pool of talented PWD.

Establish Long-Term Meaningful Partnerships for the Effective Realization of Corporate Objectives

At present, the business and its stakeholder engagement for successful implementation of disability initiatives in the workplace is weak. Voluntary participation in mainstreaming disabilities in the workplace will entail businesses building long-term partnerships with multi-stakeholders to address the different dimensions of the subject. These partnerships will require businesses to create both internal and external stakeholder engagements. For example, the social model of disabilities remains weakly interpreted and implemented in Myanmar. This has a deliberating impact on business efforts to integrate disabilities in the workplace. The challenges of collaborative efforts of the government, civil society, and businesses to construct a stronger social model will help businesses in their workplace engagement with PWD.

Align with Global Trends and a Futuristic Approach

In Myanmar, while the governance mechanism to facilitate the integration of PWD in the workplace and business participation to address the same is in place, it is the enforcement which remains amiss. There remains an absence of a strong regulatory environment for the disability initiative. With changes in a global working climate and demand from foreign investors and partners to consider issues that go beyond the law (as already underway for issues such as transparency, workplace rights, human rights issues, gender, amongst others), along with the corporate ambitions of international expansion by Myanmar businesses, the economic institutions will benefit from the voluntary adoption of disabilities as a corporate initiative.

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