SOCIAL INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF VISUALLY CHALLENGED EMPLOYEES IN THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion and active participation of visually challenged individuals in professional environments represent a crucial aspect of modern societal progress and equity. Despite significant advancements in technology and social awareness, barriers persist, hindering the full integration of visually challenged individuals into the workforce. This project seeks to explore the multifaceted dynamics surrounding the social inclusion and participation of visually challenged individuals within professional settings.

The traditional medical model has defined disability as an individual's physical or mental impairment. It focuses on the need for medical intervention to "fix" the disability. It overlooks the societal factors that create barriers for people with disabilities. The other criticism for this approach is that it positions individuals with disabilities as needing to adapt to a world not designed for them. The social model of disability offers a critical lens for reading about disability. Social model perspective argues that disability is not solely a physical or mental impairment, but rather a product of social barriers and environmental limitations. Society disables people by creating physical and attitudinal obstacles that hinder their participation. The modern workplace thrives on a diverse and inclusive environment. While significant strides have been made towards equality, individuals with visual impairments continue to face challenges in achieving full social inclusion and participation within the professional sphere. Technology has been a game-changer in promoting social inclusion for individuals with visual impairments. Websites and applications are increasingly incorporating features like screen reader compatibility, keyboard navigation, and alt text descriptions for images. This allows visually challenged

users to interact with digital platforms on an equal footing with sighted users. Assistive technologies bridge the gap in information access, allowing visually challenged individuals to compete for jobs and participate in educational opportunities. But the ongoing need for user friendly interfaces remains as a hurdle for their full-length participation.

Other than this the attitudes of colleagues can significantly impact the social inclusion and well-being of visually challenged employees in the professional environment. The impact of the workplace on visually challenged employees depends largely on the level of accessibility and inclusion offered. This dissertation explores the complex interplay between social inclusion and the professional experiences of visually challenged individuals. Study tries to describe the work experiences of visually challenged employees within professional environment. Welfare measures enacted by state governments and improved technological interface is enabling the disabled people to access higher education and employment. Studies examining visually challenged individuals in professional environments often explore the interplay between the social model of disability and the realities of the workplace. The experiences and perceptions of visually challenged employees constitute this study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Exploring the social inclusion and participation of visually challenged individual in professional environment holds significant sociological implications. Analyzing how visually challenged individuals navigate professional settings provides light on the dynamics of social structures. It helps in uncovering how societal norms, prejudices, and systemic barriers influence the opportunities and experiences of marginalized groups within the workforce. Investigating the experiences of visually challenged individuals in professional environments sheds insights into power dynamics within organizations. It reveals how power is exercised, negotiated, and sometimes contested between different social groups, especially in contexts where certain groups face structural disadvantages. Examining the intersectionality of disability with other social categories such as gender, race, class, area of residence or work and age enhances understanding of how multiple forms of discrimination intersect and compound to shape individuals' experiences in professional settings. The potential study tries to delve in to the perception of people regarding their disability and how they are impacted by the social world around them.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

☐   To narrate the perspectives of visually challenged employees themselves regarding their experiences of social inclusion and participation in the workplace.

☐   Analysing how do perceptions of social support from colleagues and supervisors influence the social inclusion and participation of visually challenged employees.

Assessing how do cultural attitudes and stereotypes about visual impairment affect the social inclusion and participation.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to investigate the social inclusion and participation of visually challenged employees in professional environments, with a focus on the perception and conception of disability by both visually challenged individuals themselves and by others. The central problem addressed is how these perceptions and conceptions shape the social realities experienced by visually challenged employees in their professional lives. These perceptions can either facilitate or hinder their inclusion and participation in the workplace. To address this problem, the study employs a narrative approach, wherein the life experiences of visually challenged employees are collected and analysed as narratives. These narratives serve as valuable sources of data, offering insights into the meanings ascribed to their experiences by visually challenged individuals themselves. Furthermore, a constructionist framework is utilized to understand how these meanings are constructed and negotiated within the context of social interactions and societal norms. By examining the narratives of visually challenged employees, the study aims to uncover the subjective interpretations and understandings of disability within professional environments.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, an exploratory research design is used. Primarily exploratory, exploratory research is frequently qualitative. This study explores the experiences of working professionals who are visually impaired in this changing environment. This research delves into the experiences of visually impaired professionals within this evolving landscape. This exploratory study aims to gain a deeper understanding of their workplace participation, experience, challenges and the level of social inclusion

they received from co-workers. Qualitative methods are utilized to delve into the subjective experiences and perspectives of visually challenged individuals.

SOURCES OF DATA

This research is solely based on primary data collected through interview method. As an exploratory research primary sources are taken for fetching a fresh perspective directly from the subjects. Ten participants provided the data required to conduct this study. Prior to the research the existing literature on disability within sociology is referred to get theoretical framework of the study. As qualitative research the experiences and insights of the respondents constitute data for this study.

TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

Semi Structured Interview: A flexible interview guide is developed comprising open-ended questions and prompts that cover key areas of inquiry while allowing for spontaneous exploration of participants' experiences. The questions begin with a broad, introductory questions to establish rapport and gradually delve into more specific topics related to social participation, challenges faced, attitude of colleagues and perception of disability towards the narrative of respondents itself. Probing questions are included to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses, share anecdotes, and provide nuanced insights. Phone interviews are conducted, fifteen questions are included within the interview guide containing prompts to provide on accessibility into social spaces and leisure activities other than experiences within professional environment.

POPULATION OF THE STUDY

The participants of this study involve visually challenged employees in various professional sectors. Ten samples are taken for this study including employees from banking sector, teaching field, government officers and one IT professional as a representative of private sector within this, 5 participants are women and 5 participants are men. The interviews are conducted through phone calls as an effective and convenient method as face-to-face interaction was not feasible due to the scattered distribution of the respondents.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Total ten subjects are interviewed within this study and the findings are generalized based on this limited sample. The Reliance on self-reported data might introduce biases, such as social desirability

bias where participants may provide responses they believe are socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true experiences. Employing intersectional approach in the study was difficult as most of the respondents never recognized their multiple identities as intersecting and the responses received to this question is very minimal. Lack of participants covering diverse professional spheres also poses a diminution of comparative analysis based on different professional spaces. Limitation of time and access to appropriate research facilities restricted the breadth of the study.

ANALYSIS

Identifying the experiences of visually challenged employees within professional environment carries the elements of encountered barriers to inclusion. The major barriers identified within this research includes physical barriers like inaccessible buildings or digital barriers such as inaccessible software and websites, Attitudinal barriers, such as stereotypes and misconceptions about the capabilities of visually impaired individuals and to a small extend the low feeling of visually challenged but it don't have any impact in their professional management. This research is qualitative in approach and indicates a complex landscape for visually challenged individuals in professional environments. While advancements in technology and accessibility standards are creating a more inclusive environment, challenges still persist. The first research objective is on the narration of perspectives of visually challenged employees themselves regarding their experiences of social inclusion and participation in the workplace. The experiences are collected from ten professionals constituting three teaching professionals, 4 bank managers, two government officers and one IT professional. Each of them have given a detailed narration on their work experience including duties, superior – worker relation, colleague support and institutional policies and accessibility measures. The professional experience of visually challenged individuals differs greatly depending on the workplace environment and support systems in place. The degree of visual impairment significantly impacts person's experience within a specific job sector.

Individual with low vision are adopted to work with magnified screens, brighter lighting, or screen reader software. These adjustments are available in work environment with minimal disruption. People who are totally challenged rely more on assistive technologies like text-to-speech software or refreshable Braille displays. The success of these adaptations depends on the sector's reliance on visual tasks. The take up of technology within each work place is almost similar with similar assistive devices and web applications. In banking sector employees expressed high level satisfaction as they enabled full

length work participation with appropriate technologies. Communicative technologies make teaching more feasible for visually impaired individuals. Text- to-speech software, Braille displays, and digital textbooks convert visual information into formats usable by visually impaired teachers. According to the narrative, communicative technologies open doors for visually impaired individuals to pursue a fulfilling career in teaching. In short technology plays a vital role in creating a more inclusive and productive work environment for

visually challenged officers. But on the other hand, out dated technology make visually challenged professionals dependent on colleagues or support staff for completing tasks that could be handled independently with proper tools. This impact their confidence and overall work efficiency sometimes. A common challenge reported by visually impaired individuals is the need to consistently prove their capabilities to colleagues and superiors. This often requires them to provide elaborate explanations and demonstrations of their skills and efficiency. Visually impaired individuals often encounter the challenge of needing to continually demonstrate their capabilities to colleagues and superiors, particularly within the banking sector. This can involve extensive efforts to prove their competence and proficiency in performing tasks related to their number digits, despite facing barriers related to visual impairment.

The second objectives of this study seek to understand the perceptions of social support from colleagues and supervisors influence the social inclusion and participation of visually challenged employees. Colleagues of visually challenged employees often exhibit supportive and empathetic perceptions based on their experiences. They tend to appreciate the skills and perspectives that visually challenged individuals bring to the workplace. This understanding fosters a cooperative environment where colleagues are willing to assist and accommodate their visually impaired peers, leading to a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture. Apart from some situations where superiors might resort to scolding or imposing extra pressure on employees, those overseeing visually challenged individuals often exhibit understanding, empathy, and adaptability. Instead of admonishing for tasks taking longer or errors occurring, they offer assistance and encouragement. But as narrated by some respondents certainly the perception of risk associated with assigning certain tasks to visually challenged employees, particularly those involving digits and numbers, may arise due to concerns about accuracy, efficiency, and potential errors. Another concern is the efficiency of completing numerical tasks within required time frames. However, it's important to recognize that many visually impaired individuals develop highly effective strategies for working with numbers, such as using specialized software, braille

displays, or tactile aids. The potential errors are not only the case with visually challenged employees, it happens with every employee particularly within banking sector. To address concerns about potential errors, superiors can implement error management strategies that apply to all employees, regardless of their visual abilities.

From the analysis it is visible that the education and employment status has a good role in contributing towards inclusive environment and participation of disabled persons in society. Visually challenged individuals with higher educational and employment statuses often command respect and are highly valued both within their work environments and in broader society. Whether they hold advanced degrees, certifications, or specialized training, their employment background equips them with the skills and insights necessary to excel in their roles. Visually challenged individuals who have attained higher educational and employment statuses serve as inspirational figures and role models for others facing similar challenges. From the experiences provided by employees it can be inferred that employment status make them privileged in their social life. Despite their accomplishments and capabilities, visually challenged individuals still encounter situations outside of the work environment where they feel disadvantaged due to their visual impairment.

In social and professional settings alike, visually challenged individuals may encounter biases or stereotypes that affect how others perceive and interact with them. Officers may feel disadvantaged when they sense that their visual impairment is perceived as a limitation or when others make assumptions about their capabilities based on their disability rather than their qualifications or achievements. This can lead to feelings of frustration, marginalization, or lack of recognition for their skills and contributions. In some situations, officers may face attitudinal barriers from individuals who are not familiar with or understanding of visual impairments. The intersectionality of gender and disability indeed create unique challenges and forms of oppression for visually impaired women officers, particularly in areas such as transportation and mobility. Visually impaired women officers face increased dependency on others for transportation due to both of their identity, gender and disability. Among the participants of this study five of them are female employees who works near to their residence. Therefore, the effort to reach out workplace is easier for them. But other than work Women with disabilities, including visual impairments, face heightened safety concerns when traveling alone, particularly in unfamiliar or poorly lit environments. This limit their freedom of movement and lead to a reliance on others for accompaniment or assistance, perpetuating feelings of vulnerability and dependence among others.

KEY FINDINGS

☐   The shift towards inclusive design has helped break down societal barriers and promote greater participation and inclusion for disabled individuals in various aspects of life. The social model perspective on disability indeed argues that disability is primarily a result of social barriers and attitudes rather than solely a result of an individual's impairment. In this context, technology plays a crucial role in breaking down these constructed barriers, enabling individuals with disabilities to overcome limitations and participate more fully in society. However, the support and awareness fostered within families, especially through parental support, are essential factors in driving this change. Families play a vital role in promoting skill development and fostering independence in individuals with disabilities.

☐   Certainly, the impact of the workplace environment on the social inclusion of visually challenged individuals can vary depending on the nature of the profession and the culture of the organization. There is an under estimation persist in banking sector the misconception that visually challenged individuals are not capable of working in cash counters or with digits. This assumption is outdated and ignores the advancements in technology and accommodations that make it possible for visually impaired individuals to perform tasks involving cash handling and numerical operations. In the teaching field, colleagues often exhibit a strong sense of empathy and compassion towards visually challenged individuals. This may be due to the nature of the profession, which values inclusivity and diversity, and emphasizes the importance of supporting all students and educators. Colleagues in the teaching field may be more inclined to offer assistance, accommodation, and emotional support to visually challenged individuals. There is some exceptions to this. In the office sphere, colleagues may demonstrate a different but equally valuable form of support for visually challenged individuals.

☐   The social model perspective of disability is highly applicable in understanding the intersectional experiences of gender and disability among female officers. This perspective emphasizes that disability is not solely a result of individual impairment but is also shaped by societal barriers, attitudes, and structures. In the case of female officers with disabilities, the social model perspective highlights how systemic issues such as ableism, sexism, and gender discrimination intersect to create intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization. Intersectional experience of gender and disability accentuate the unique challenges faced by female officers who also have disabilities. In this context, the application of the social model perspective of disability becomes particularly relevant as it emphasizes how societal

barriers and attitudes contribute to the oppression and marginalization of individuals with disabilities, especially within the context of gender dynamics and societal norms.

In a nutshell, several key variables play pivotal roles in determining the social inclusion and participation of visually impaired individuals in the workplace, with education, family awareness, employment status, and societal support systems being among the most significant. Additionally, the level of support and inclusivity can vary between different sectors, with the government sector often providing more support compared to the private sector. In the private sector, the emphasis tends to be more on competing skills, irrespective of any differences, including disabilities. Despite the presence of unequal social relations associated with disability, advancements in material aspects of life have triggered significant transitions in non-material aspects such as societal views and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. One observable manifestation of this shift is the increasing representation of visually challenged individuals in prestigious occupational roles, often accompanied by high levels of satisfaction

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The study on "Social Inclusion and Participation of Visually Challenged Employees in the Professional Environment: A Comparative Analysis" carries significant educational implications. The findings suggest that the school environment tends to foster a more inclusive atmosphere for visually challenged individuals compared to professional settings. This highlights the critical importance of nurturing inclusive attitudes among children from an early age, as such early interventions can lay the groundwork for a more inclusive work and life environment.

Education is instrumental in reshaping societal attitudes and combating misconceptions and stereotypes related to disabilities. By integrating inclusive practices and attitudes into educational settings, we can help alter perceptions and promote understanding, thereby creating a more accepting and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities both in their professional and personal lives.

CONCLUSION

Historically, individuals with disabilities faced significant barriers to meaningful employment opportunities due to pervasive societal prejudices and misconceptions regarding their capabilities. However, with the advent of technological advancements, changes in legislation promoting equal rights and opportunities, and evolving societal attitudes towards inclusivity and diversity, the landscape has gradually begun to shift. In the case of visually challenged individuals, advancements in assistive technologies, coupled with specialized training programs and educational opportunities, have empowered them to excel in various fields traditionally deemed inaccessible. Moreover, the satisfaction reported by visually challenged individuals in such roles signifies not only their personal fulfilment but also the effectiveness of inclusive practices in fostering a supportive and accommodating work environment. It highlights the importance of promoting accessibility, reasonable accommodations, and fostering a culture of acceptance and respect within organizations.

The conclusion drawn from this exploratory research reveals several significant insights into the experiences of visually challenged employees in the workplace and the attitudes of their colleagues towards them. The overwhelmingly positive evaluations of work life by visually challenged employees and their satisfaction with their roles indicate a shift in societal perceptions and the effectiveness of inclusive practices in fostering a supportive work environment. Firstly, the findings suggest that visually challenged individuals are not only capable of fulfilling their professional responsibilities but also derive a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction from their work. This challenges traditional notions that equate disability with limitations and underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique skills and contributions of individuals with disabilities. Secondly the favourable evaluations of work life also reflect positively on the attitudes of colleagues towards visually challenged employees. The acceptance, respect, and support demonstrated by colleagues contribute significantly to the overall satisfaction and well-being of visually challenged individuals in the workplace. This highlights the importance of fostering a culture of inclusivity, empathy, and mutual respect within organizations. Additionally, the findings suggest that perceptions of disability are evolving, with a growing recognition of the capabilities and potential of visually challenged individuals. By showcasing the success and satisfaction of visually challenged employees in their roles, this research challenges stereotypes and encourages greater acceptance and integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce.

Overall, the conclusion of this exploratory research underscores the importance of creating inclusive work environments that accommodate the needs of visually challenged employees while fostering a culture of acceptance and support among colleagues. It highlights the potential for positive

outcomes when organizations prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization as a whole.

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