

Employment Opportunities for the Visually Impaired in Ghana

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Abstract

This survey study examined current employment status of visually impaired individuals in Ghana. It looked at some of the factors that militate against the successful employment and sustainability of individuals with visual impairment in the country. It reviewed some policies that relate to employment of persons with disability in general and how these policies translate to practical employment opportunities for the visually impaired in the country. Some members of four associations for and of the Blind in Ghana namely, the Ghana Society for the Blind, Ghana Association of the Blind, Ghana Blind Teachers Association, The Ghana Federation of the Disabled, 26 blind teachers in two Special Schools, 4 visually impaired retirees, 5 visually impaired beggars in Accra and 2 self-employed visually impaired were involved in the study. Both purposive and convenient sampling techniques were used in the selection of the sample size. A six-item open-ended questionnaire in Braille and semi-structured interview guide were used to collect data and the analysis was done using both interpretive and verbatim expression methods. The findings of the study have revealed that access to job information is not an easy task for the visually impaired largely due to the absence of newspapers in Braille format. Even though, there are well articulated policies in Ghana towards the employment of persons with disabilities in general, these have not been effective. The labour market is competitive, unfriendly and characterized by negative public prejudice and disbelief.

Keywords: Visually - Impaired; Employment Opportunity; Disabilities.

Introduction

In the past, persons with disabilities generally received certain negative treatments as a result of poor understanding of their individual potentialities. During the 1990s, the UN Declaration enjoined all nations to pay effective attention to all persons with disabilities in terms of education, employment and other social issues. Rehabilitation programmes were instituted with the hope of alleviating the problems of the disabled. Indeed, national and international policies have been promulgated to that effect. In effect, nations have been mandated to focus on the equal rights of persons with disabilities. This paper evaluates the employment opportunities for the visually impaired within the context of Ghana.

Background to the Study

Employment opportunities have been recognized as major problems facing persons with disabilities globally. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reviewed the 2001 World Employment Report, and observed that close to hundred and sixty (160) million unemployed individuals live in the world and many of them live below the poverty line (Yirenkyi, 2002). The report further indicated that the figure is nearly a third of the world's three billion workforce. To safeguard equal employment opportunities, Article 23 (1) of Universal Declaration of Rights by the UN states: everyone has the rights to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions or work and to protection against unemployment (UN Declaration, 1948). In spite of this act, there are unemployment and underemployment issues which are frequently reported in local and international papers. Indeed, employment and unemployment issues are of great concern to many governments, and employers in general.

In order to mitigate the effect of poverty resulting from employment problems, many African countries and other developing countries over the last two decades have tried to implement structural adjustment and poverty reduction strategies to enhance economic growth and development (Baah-Boateng, 2003). The impacts of these policies have been marginal and unimpressive due to poor domestic economic management and some uncontrollable external factors such as oil price hikes and drought. Instead of using the economic reform measures to create jobs for the citizens in order to alleviate poverty, they have generally been used to service debts (Boateng, 2000).

After two decades of economic reform in Ghana, the expected long-run benefit in terms of employment generation and poverty reduction are yet to be achieved. According to Young (1996), unemployment is still on the increase with the rate standing at 10.1% as at 2000 and overall poverty incidence hovering around 40% in 1994. One important initiative which seeks to reverse the deteriorating employment and poverty situation in Ghana is the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. This initiative seeks to free national fiscal resources from debt servicing constraints to enable the countries improve upon human development through a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction (Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy (GPRS) (2004).

The Ghanaian labour market is largely dominated by agriculture and allied activities. The past two decades have witnessed major changes in the Ghanaian labour market due to globalization. Public sector employment suffered as a result of retrenchment and privatization. Many people in the public sector including the visually impaired became jobless since many workers were retrenched or redeployed (Baah-Boateng, 2003).

Employment growth in Ghana appears to lag behind economic growth. Between 1984 and 2000, the economy recorded an annual average growth of 4.8% and employment growth for the same period averaged 3.1%. Employment issues relating to individuals with disabilities are contentious and engage the attention of many peoples and nations. This is very crucial

to the category of exceptional individuals known as the visually impaired (generally labelled blind). Mason and McCall (1997) notes; the modern concept of disability became associated with expectations of a life of dependency upon charity and beggary following the industrial revolution.

Wood and Lazzari (1997) researched into employment conditions for the visually impaired in the United States of America and noted that while there are individuals with visual impairment who are successful musicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, sports broadcasters, corporate executives, homemakers, salespersons and entrepreneurs, it has been estimated that as many as 70% of working age persons who are visually impaired in the USA and Canada are either unemployed or underemployed. Wood and Lazzari (1997) also argued that the unemployment rate for persons with congenital visual impairment in USA and Canada is estimated to be even higher between 80% and 90%. Even though, the picture painted above is gloomy, the presence and strict implementation of the social welfare service package assuages the harmful effects of the employment difficulties. In developed countries, weekly or monthly subventions are provided to the disabled, aged and the vulnerable in society for living expenses. However, these facilities such as disability living allowances are not available.

In Ghana, there are other policies and programmes directed at the welfare of persons with disabilities. For instance, the proposed Ghana Revised National Population Policy Action Plan of 1994 to promote full integration of persons with disabilities in all aspects of national development also sets the following objectives:

- To identify and register persons with disabilities
- To review and enforce policy on the employment of the disabled
- To enact laws to establish the rights of disabled persons
- To carry out periodic training to update the skills of disabled persons
- To establish more rehabilitation centres.

The Ghana Disability Act of 2006 also made provisions for persons with disabilities. These among others are:

- The government shall grant individuals and organizations who employ persons with disabilities an annual tax rebate of the taxable income in respect of each person with disability employed as shall be prescribed in regulations made under this Act.
- The government shall grant special incentives to person with disabilities engaged in business and also to business organizations that employ persons with disabilities.
- A person who employs persons with disabilities shall provide (a) the relevant working tools and (b) appropriate facilities required by the person with disability for the efficient performance of the functions required by the employment.

In spite of all these national promulgations, employment issues are thorny issues for many persons with visual impairment who are marginalized and consequently resort to begging and living on the streets (Ocloo & Owusu, 1998). Statistics from the offices of the Associations of and for the Blind in Ghana indicated that there are about 2 to 3 million visually impaired

individuals in the country. The Director of Ghana Society for the Blind (GSB) pointed out that out of this figure, about 500,000 visually impaired individuals have been educated and rehabilitated in the country of which only 20% are gainfully employed. There are at the moment in Ghana, very few visually impaired persons in gainful employment and the number of students especially at the tertiary level is not very encouraging.

Statistical information from the office of the Ghana Blind Teachers' Association revealed that three hundred and ninety-six (396) visually impaired teachers constituted members of the Association. Even though all teachers with visual impairment might not have registered with the Association or group, 396 out of over hundred and twenty thousand (120,000) teachers in the country is insignificant. The United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities (rule 7) which are on employment mandates that "member states should recognize the principle that persons with disabilities must be empowered to exercise their human rights, particularly in the field of employment". In both rural and urban areas, it further stated that visually impaired individuals should have equal opportunities for productive and gainful employment in the labour market.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

- To what extent are persons with visual impairment getting access to information about employment in Ghana?
- What specific legislations promote the employment opportunities for the visually impaired in Ghana?
- How receptive is the Ghanaian labour market to persons with visual impairment?
- What are the barriers which affect job acquisition for the visually impaired?
- How do you support members of your association to get employment?

Methodology

This study adopts the descriptive survey design. The choice of this design is influenced by the fact that views were collected from respondents on current employment opportunities for persons with visual impairment in Ghana. As Patton (1990) pointed out, this design provides a direction and framework for developing flexible data collection tactics. The merit of the descriptive approach is that data is collected and described to reflect what prevails on the ground. The demerit however, of surveys is that there may be difficulty getting questionnaires completed by a number of respondents on time so that meaningful analyses can be made (Macmillan & Schumacher, 1997).

Population and Sample

These involved members of The Ghana Society for the Blind, Ghana Association of the Blind, Ghana Blind Teachers Association, The Ghana Federation of the Disabled and other visually impaired adults who are gainfully employed. The estimated number is 1.8 million.

The sample involved were two executives from each of the 4 associations, 4 retirees who are visually impaired, 26 blind teachers from the two schools for the Blind at Wa and Akropong, 5 visually impaired beggars in the streets of Accra and 2 self-employed visually impaired persons also in Accra. In all, 45 respondents were involved in the study.

The sampling technique adopted was the purposive one for selecting the executives, retirees, teachers and the self-employed visually impaired persons. The purposive sampling technique was adopted because the organizations are well established with identified executives and the respondents who are visually impaired were in a better position to provide the needed information for the study. A number of places in city of Accra noted for their numerous begging activities were visited and some individuals with visual impairment found begging were sampled conveniently for the study.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in data collection are questionnaire and interview. A six-item open-ended brailled questionnaire was developed for the visually impaired teachers involved in the study. A semi-structured interview guide built on the key themes in the research questions was also developed for the executives of the association, the retirees and those individuals identified as engaging in begging.

Data Collection Procedure

A familiarization visit was undertaken to the offices of the Associations in Accra and the purpose of our study made known to participants. A convenient date was fixed for each of the association executives upon which we went back to conduct the interview. Each interview session lasted for about 45 minutes to one hour.

For the teachers, we made similar visits to their schools and informed them about the study. To ensure high return rate, we sought their consent for the completion of the brailled questionnaire. These were retrieved on the same day.

Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using the interpretive method as well as verbatim expressions of respondents. The interview responses were read over and over in order to identify the key issues which emerged frequently. These were categorized according to the key themes raised in the research questions. As qualitative research is pluralist and leads to significant reduction, organization and interpretation of data, we also held regular meetings to discuss emerging issues and concerns around the themes of our interview guide to achieve the above (Papadopoulos, Scanlon & Lees, 2002).

Results

Access to information about employment for persons with visual impairment in Ghana

When respondents were asked about how they get access to information on job opportunities, apart from the 26 blind teachers who said that after their periods of training, they had direct posting to the various places of teaching, the rest of the respondents noted that they had to

make frantic efforts on their own through the contacting of several ministries before they were able to acquire the job they are currently engaged in. Quite a few respondents stated that they were helped by friends and family members in getting access to job information and employment. A major outcome from the respondents showed that prospective employees had difficulty getting employers to respond to their application forms. For instance, three respondents who had second degrees, explained that their application forms for lecturing position in the universities had not been responded to for over four years. The responses from the respondents indicated that information about job opportunities in newspapers, notice boards or from employment centres was often difficult for the visually impaired because these advertisements are not in Braille format.

Specific legislations on employment opportunities for the disabled

As regards whether there are specific legislations for employment opportunities for the disabled, 20 respondents said that no such legislations exist. However, 25 respondents said that there appears to be a law of 0.5% for employment quota. However, the respondents were quick to remark that even if the law exists, it has been dysfunctional.

The receptiveness of the Ghanaian labour market to persons with visual impairment

Responses relating to the friendliness of the Ghanaian labour market were negative from all the respondents. Majority of the respondents noted that the labour market is highly competitive. Some respondents said that it was difficult to get employment of their choice. Some respondents also explained that even with very high qualification getting a job is still very difficult.

Barriers affecting job acquisition for the visually impaired

Regarding barriers to job acquisition for the visually impaired, all the responses were unfavourable. Some graduate teachers expressed their disbelief when asked how they will teach after graduating from University. This was notwithstanding the fact that they had participated in the on-campus and off-campus teaching practices and had been supervised by these same university dons. Such comments underline the negative perception of people towards the work capacity of persons with visual impairment.

Level of support available for persons with visual impairment

In reaction to this issue, all the visually impaired teachers noted that they needed a lot of support but these never come directly from government. They explained that the guide allowance facility which is meant for them is so meagre and sometimes, it is not paid and if paid at all is irregular. Accommodation was one area of concern to all the respondents. The executives of the associations for and of the blind in Ghana disclosed that they supported their members in a number of ways and this included the provision of educational materials such as brailers, Brailon sheets and in-service training. A few of the respondents especially those on retirement indicated that on a few cases employers either refused or unduly delayed the payment of their entitlements.

Findings and Discussions

From this research, access to information leading to job acquisition is not an easy thing for the visually impaired in Ghana. Many employers would not offer employment to the visually impaired even though there is the 0.5% quota requiring employers to do so. The reactions of the respondents to the availability of legislations backing employment are mixed. While 20 out of the 45 respondents said they were not aware of such legislations, the rest indicated that they are aware of the 0.5% quota system, but said it is not being implemented.

It was also realized that the Ghanaian labour market is not receptive to the visually impaired because of the competitive nature, and lack of jobs. In addition, attitudinal issues are major barriers to the employment opportunities for the visually impaired. The findings revealed that many people doubted the work capability of persons with visual impairment.

Finally, it was revealed that the necessary supports that are provided for persons who are visually impaired and are working is not satisfactory. Support in terms of equipment and remunerations are not paid promptly to these individuals.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made:

- Employers need to be educated on the capabilities of the visually impaired. This crusade ought to be done using both print and electronic media. Visually impaired individuals who are gainfully employed could be involved in this education drive for them to serve as role models for the youth.
- The legislation concerning the employment quota of 0.5% for persons with disabilities in Ghana needs to be activated and enforced. It is hoped that the enforcement would compel employers to engage the services of persons with disabilities who are qualified and capable of serving in their chosen fields of employment or career.
- The government should make it a policy that organizations and individuals who employ persons with disabilities enjoy some concessions in terms of tax exemptions, subsidies and other attractive incentives.
- It is also important that visually impaired persons who engage in self-employment be supported with the necessary resources to avert the situation of going back to the street to beg.
- Issues concerning retrenchment or laying off of disabled employees such as the craft instructors who were visually impaired thereby rendering them jobless, should rather take the form of rehabilitation to enable them enter into another job area.

Conclusion

It is suggested that education, ICT and regular government fiscal support are immediate and lasting solution to the employment problem of persons with visual impairment in Ghana. Schools and colleges should therefore run courses which are relevant to the unique needs and aspirations of disabled people to empower them economically.

It is on record that from time to time, the associations for and of the blind in Ghana even with their meagre resources organize training workshops on soap-making, introduction to ICT, pomade and shea-butter extraction for their members. It is high time the government of Ghana resourced these associations adequately for them to embark on vigorous youth employment programmes on regular basis for their members whereby beneficiaries of the training programmes could be given seed monies as working capital to enable them establish small scale businesses as self-directed employment which according to Albright (1993) is an option that is of increasing interest to people with disabilities both in economically developed and developing countries.

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