

NEGOTIATING EMPLOYMENT-BASED MARGINALISATION: VOICES OF PHYSICALLY DISABLED PEOPLE IN LAO PDR

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Abstract

As one of Southeast Asia's poorest nations, achieving sustainable development is a monumental challenge for Laos. One of the biggest challenges the nation is currently facing is achieving inclusiveness for all sectors of the population, especially the marginalised sector. In Laos, physically disabled people are restricted from full participation in society in vital domains such as education and employment. This study uses a life history approach to analyse the challenges and negotiation process of physically disabled people in the Laotian labour market. The study interviewed 12 Participants in Vientiane Capital and the Xiengkhuang province between March 2020 and May 2021. The participants faced structural, physical, and social barriers based on their disability. The negotiation process refers to how the Participants handled their challenges in the employment realm. The study found that the participants faced various challenges, including inaccessible transportation, inaccessible workplaces, and negative attitudes from employers and co-workers. The strategies were considerably different among the participants in mitigating the challenges. The study concludes that despite these challenges, some of the participants were able to find employment and negotiate successful outcomes in the Laotian labour market.

Keywords: disability studies, marginalisation, life-history research, UN SDGs, Lao PDR

Introduction

One of the most glaring issues for disability and employment in Laos is that there is little research on the intersection of physical disability and marginalisation in the labour market. The majority of research on physical disability and marginalisation in Laos has taken a generalised approach; this means that all

physical disabilities have been grouped and treated as one unified group (Buchner, 2011; Thoresen et al., 2014; Hinton & Rutherford, 2014). The generalised approach to researching physical disability and marginalisation can lead to inaccurate conclusions about the experiences of individuals with disabilities. The causes, effects, and experiences of marginalisation can vary greatly depending on the individual's specific disability. Hence, it is important to explore the particular experiences of physically disabled individuals in Laos to develop more effective interventions to address marginalisation effectively. By exploring the particular experiences of individuals with disabilities, researchers can better understand the factors contributing to marginalisation and develop more effective interventions to address them.

Why Should Disability Merit Academic and Policy Attention?

Laos is a developing country that is working to achieve sustainable development. This means that the country is trying to improve the lives of its citizens in all areas, including social and economic development (Phimphanthavong, 2014). Hence, the significance of inclusive employment in Laos is now as high as ever.

Disabled communities in Laos are among the most vulnerable and marginalised due to the nation's lack of infrastructure and the strong stigma against disability; this means that many people with disabilities lack access to necessities such as accessible transportation, accessible buildings, and assistive devices, in addition, they are often discriminated against and excluded from society (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Buchner, 2011; Thoresen et al., 2014; Hinton & Rutherford, 2014).

With all that said, this study aims to promote inclusive employment in Laos. The study will use a life history approach to examine the challenges and negotiation process of physically disabled people in the Laotian labour market. Literature in the Global North (Wilkins, 2004; Banks, 2015) and the Global South (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Hussain, 2021) both claimed that physically disabled people are marginalised in all essential domains, from education to employment. However, only a few studies explore the negotiation process of marginalisation.

Literature of disability studies in the Lao context is mainly focused on the macro perspective; therefore, the voices of disabled people are barely touched upon (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009; Mitra et al., 2013, p. 5; Buchner, 2011). This research argues that the negotiation process of the physically disabled community in contemporary Laos is experiencing the reframing phenomenon. Instead of being victimised by the barriers, the disabled community is coming up with different ways of accepting and overcoming the barriers and marginalisation in the employment domain.

People with disabilities often face challenges in the labour market, including discrimination, lack of access to education and training, and inaccessible workplaces. When the government cannot provide sufficient assistance to people with disabilities, it must find alternative ways to overcome marginalisation. This can be seen in Laos, where some people with disabilities can navigate the labour market more successfully than others. This is due to several factors, including personal perception, the will to succeed, and the personal environment. These factors transcended structural challenges, such as a lack of access to education and employment opportunities. In the past, there has been a focus on structural factors as an impediment to labour market participation for people with disabilities. However, this study shows that personal motivation, attributes, and environment are also essential factors. This is an important addition to the research on disability and employment in Laos.

This study is original as it analyses the marginalisation experience from the perspective of disabled individuals. Previous research has never explicitly explored how individuals negotiate marginalisation in Laos.

Relevance of SDGs

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) is a set of development objectives on a country level established by an alliance of 36 United Nations funds, programs, specialised agencies, departments, and offices; there are 17 goals aimed to be achieved by 2030 globally (Kakar et al., 2021, p. 3). Many of these goals are related to disability and development, thus stressing the importance of disability and development in the current world. However, three of the SGDs are highly for disability and development. Provided the goals are highly ambitious and broad, it is crucial to analyse how they relate to the research scope.

The most relevant goal is SDG 8, "Decent work and economic growth" The main objective of this goal is to promote inclusive and sustainable economic prosperity along with full and productive employment and quality work for all sectors of the population; there are 12 targets set under this goal (Ribeiro-Duthie, 2020, p.118). Once focused explicitly on the employment context, the UN reported that fostering adequate and effective employment and quality work for persons with disabilities is essential for realising Goal 8 (United Nations, 2018).

There are some specific examples of how SDG 8 is being implemented to address the employment marginalisation of people with disabilities. The World Bank works with governments and businesses, including the Lao government and Lao businesses, to promote inclusive employment practices. This includes providing technical assistance on how to make workplaces more accessible and

developing training programs for employers and employees (The World Bank, 2017).

The United Nations is one of the major global players in advocating for the rights of people with disabilities to work to raise awareness of the issue of employment marginalisation and to promote best practices. According to a UN report, the UN had mainly recommended that there should be national legislation that safeguards persons with disabilities from discrimination of all kinds in the realm of employment, there should be public recruitment policies and systems that embolden the employment of persons with disabilities and that there should be a database of available information and detailed data on disability and employment (United Nations, 2018, p.2).

These three main recommendations still need to be overcome in modern Laos. For instance, because health data on disability in Laos is still in the very early infancy stage, data is inaccurate and incomplete (Durham et al., 2015); establishing a detailed database on disability and employment can be extremely challenging and time-consuming.

The second most relevant goal is SDG10, "Reduce inequality within and among countries", the main objective of this goal is to reduce inequalities and ensure that no sector of the global population is left behind; there are ten targets set under this goal (Kuhn, 2020, p. 139). In the context of disability, SDG 10 aims to lessen inequality within and among nations via the empowerment and promotion of the social, economic, and political inclusion of all population sectors, including the disabled population (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Employment empowerment of the disabled population can be classified as an act of inclusion in the social, economic, and political realm, consistent with SDG 10, thus justifying the importance of researching disability and employment in Laos.

The third most relevant goal is SDG5, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." The main objective of this goal is to empower women and promote gender equality sustainably; nine targets are set under this goal (LeCrom, 2022, p. 121). This goal is broad as two main dimensions are associated with the goal; gender and equality. In the context of this research, the scope is limited to the disabled women population.

According to the United Nations Women (2022), because of life-long discrimination and inequalities, older women with disabilities generally possess fewer savings and assets, which results in socio-economic marginalisation. Older women with disabilities are also subjected to higher levels of discrimination and human rights violations resulting from the combined negative effect of ageism and ableism (United Nations Women, 2022). This demonstrates a complex relationship

between gender and disability presented in most of the world, including Laos, where in most cases, women are more marginalised in all domains of life compared to men, thus justifying the relevance of this goal for this research.

Disability-related Policies in Laos

The Lao government had established various laws and regulations to counter discrimination based on disability. One of the prominent examples includes the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, which was meant to provide a comprehensive framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities in Laos (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 24). The second leading example is the National Strategy for the Development of Persons with Disabilities under the 9th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan 2021-2025 (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2021). The National Strategy was a roadmap for developing policies and programs to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Laos (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2021).

In Laos, no single government body oversees all disability-related affairs. Instead, responsibility for disability-related affairs is divided among different ministries, depending on the specific issue. For example, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare is responsible for employment affairs for people with disabilities, while the Ministry of Education is responsible for educational affairs for people with disabilities.

This can make it difficult for people with disabilities to access the services and support they need, as they may have to navigate multiple government offices to get the help they need. However, it also means focusing on specific areas of need, as each ministry can specialise in its expertise. Some of the ministries that are responsible for disability-related affairs in Laos are the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare which is responsible for employment affairs for people with disabilities, as well as social welfare programs for people with disabilities. The Ministry of Education is responsible for educational affairs for people with disabilities, including providing access to education for people with disabilities and training teachers to work with students with disabilities. The Ministry of Health is responsible for healthcare for people with disabilities, including providing access to healthcare services for people with disabilities and training healthcare providers to work with patients with disabilities.

It is important to note that the responsibilities of these ministries may overlap, and other ministries may also be involved in disability-related affairs.

The Lao government has implemented several regulations to assist people with disabilities, particularly in employment. The main example is the Lao Disability Act (2019), Article 4, Section 36, which mentions vocational education, training, and human resource development. This means that people with disabilities in Laos should be entitled to vocational education or training to help them generate income.

Another example of Article 4 of the Lao Disability Act (2019) can be seen in Section 38, which states that people with disabilities have the right to be employed in the government sector, NGOs, foreign organisations, companies, and other organisations based on their knowledge and capabilities. This means that people with disabilities should not be discriminated against in the workplace. They should be given the same opportunities as everyone else to be employed, regardless of their disability. This is a necessary provision, as it helps to ensure that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the workforce and contribute to society.

The 9th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2021-2025) is the central policy guiding all Laos's socio-economic development policies. It is a national strategy that all related organisations and stakeholders should follow. The plan has several sub-policies, and each sub-policy has specific programs dedicated to disability affairs and disabled people in the nation. These programs aim to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Laos by providing access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation.

The 9th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan is an important step forward in promoting the rights of people with disabilities in Laos. It provides a framework for ensuring that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in society and contribute to the country's development. One of the goals of the Health Sector Development Plan under the National Plan is to create a quality labour force. This means developing the labour force in line with industrialisation and modernisation to provide opportunities for disadvantaged workers, such as people with disabilities.

The Development Plan (2021) states that one of the end goals of the Health Sector Development Plan is to integrate the disabled population into the labour force. This means providing people with disabilities with the skills and opportunities they need to find and maintain employment. Integrating people with disabilities into the labour force is vital for several reasons. First, it helps to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Laos by allowing them to earn a living and contribute to society. Second, it helps to create a more inclusive society by breaking down barriers and stereotypes about people with disabilities. Third, it can help to boost the economy by increasing the number of workers available.

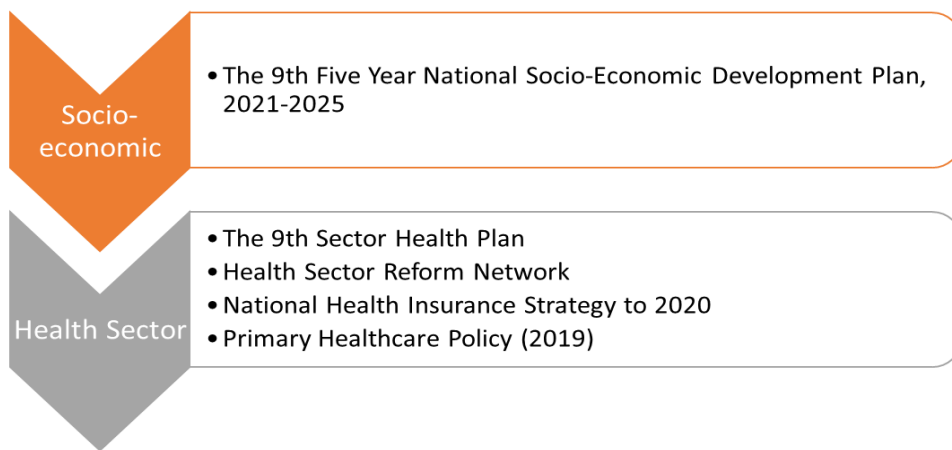


Figure 1: Visualisation of the policies extracted from the Lao 9th Five-Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan, 2021-2015 (p. 67)

Assistance and Disability-related Organisations in Laos

Exploring the assistance and disability-related organisations in contemporary Laos is also important. The Lao Disabled People's Association (LDPA), established in 1996, is a membership-based organisation for people with disabilities advocating disability rights and providing services to members based on their needs (Appelhans, 2017, p. 67). The LDPA is one of the few officially recognised non-profit associations in Lao PDR. The LDPA is also an officially registered civil society organisation. It is the largest organisation for disabled people in Laos. Provided that Laos is a developing nation, there is a considerable reliance on NGOs, mainly international NGOs, to assist disabled people. It is estimated that around 150 related bodies and organisations are dedicated to the general disabled population incorporating mental and physical disability (Appelhans, 2017, p. 69).

One vital point to note is that although the number of bodies and organisations is relatively high, more is needed as the needs significantly outweigh the resources (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 300). As physically disabled people are the main focus of this research, one of the most important points to note is the significance of artificial limbs in Laos. The Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) is considered to be the only prosthetic provider in Laos (COPE, 2021).

Research Problem and Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore employment and disability in Laos. The specific focus is on physically disabled individuals in modern Laos. By utilising a life history method, this research investigates the main challenges and the negotiation process from the perspective of physically disabled people in employment.

Field research life history interview was chosen as the main research tool for primary data collection of this study. The semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words. The interviews covered a wide range of topics, including the participants' experiences of disability, their family and social relationships, and their hopes and dreams for the future. The following questions are explored: How are they marginalised explicitly within the context of employment opportunity and labour participation? How are they negotiating marginalisation, disability, and employment?

Previous studies (Buchner, 2011; Thoresen et al., 2014; Hinton & Rutherford, 2014) had to rely on what was available; hence focused research could not be conducted when there was not much information regarding physical disability as a whole and marginalisation in Laos. However, now that the previous studies have provided evidence that physically disabled individuals are among the most vulnerable and marginalised in all aspects, including education, socio-economic well-being, and employment, there is potential for further research. One of the advantages of exploring the specific context of employment-based marginalisation is that it can deeply analyse the marginalisation experiences of working-age physically disabled individuals. An advantage that previous studies could not capture but has provided the foundation to conduct further analysis with a more focused approach.

Second, the majority of previous research did not use the interviewing method. This was partly due to tracking reasons: most physically disabled individuals are challenging to find since they want to be anonymous. Furthermore, the lack of primary data on the physical disability community in Laos only made it harder for them to be contacted individually. Even with an individual analysis, we can fully comprehend the negotiation of marginalisation. This is important when numerous factors are to be considered, as there is so much complexity within employment-based marginalisation in Laos.

Literature Review

Definition of Disability

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), disability is an impairment that may be cognitive, developmental, intellectual, mental, physical, sensory, or some combination of these (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 3). It significantly affects a person's life activities and may be present from birth or during their lifetime. Three main points are associated with disability; impairments refer to actual disability conditions, such as blindness. The second point is activity limitations which refer to issues in performing activities. The final point is participation restrictions which are social issues related to the quality of life caused by disability, such as discrimination in the employment domain (World Health Organization, 2011, p. 4).

The Social Model of Disability

The social model takes the social approach toward disability. This model goes beyond the physical aspect by considering structural barriers, negative attitudes, and social exclusion (Oliver, 2013, p. 1024). Under the social model, disability and impairment are specifically differentiated. Impairment is the literal characteristic restricting a person, such as an inability to see or walk independently. In contrast, the concept of disability is referred to the barriers established by society (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 197).

Policies regarding disability are substantially different globally. However, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) of the United Nations is arguably the world's largest initiative regarding shaping and implementing policies regarding disability. The CRPD is a convention that ensures human rights for people with disability as it encompasses an extensive categorisation of persons with disabilities; therefore, all types of disabilities are entitled to all human rights and fundamental freedoms (Harpur, 2012, p. 3).

Challenges Associated with Disability

Khamvongsa and Russell (2009, p. 301) affirmed that physically disabled people are highly marginalised in Laos. They encounter challenges in all domains of physical, sociocultural, and structural barriers. Assistance programs such as rehabilitation and vocational training for disabled people are mostly unavailable and not wide-ranging. A considerable number of disabled children in the country are unable to attend school due to physical challenges and prejudice about their disability (Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009, p. 301).

Mitra, Posarac, and Vick (2013) explored the economic status of people with disabilities in 15 developing countries, including Laos. The authors (2013, p. 5) stated that in the majority of countries, disability is found to be significantly linked with higher multidimensional poverty. In addition, disability is also linked to lower access to education, lower employment rates, and higher medical expenditures. Disabled persons aged 40 and above and people with multiple disabilities were more likely to be the most marginalised (Mitra et al., 2013, p. 6). The main findings for Laos were that in Lao PDR, disability is associated with lower levels of economic well-being across household and individual levels.

Physical accessibility is commonly a significant challenge for developing nations, and this is especially true in contemporary Laos. Hinton and Rutherford (2014) stated that basic infrastructure in Laos is still lacking, especially in the rural area where most physically disabled people live. Most public buildings and shops in Laos offer very little accessibility. They tend to be very narrow with several floors as business taxation was based on the amount of street frontage the business utilised (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 25). This made it extremely difficult for disabled individuals with mobility issues.

It was also found that the negative social stigma toward disability is substantial in modern Laos (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 27). The notion of disability and disabled people in Laos is usually misunderstood and imposed with harmful stereotypes. Laos is an agrarian society, where most jobs and employment are physically intensive; hence many Laotians perceive the disabled population as burdensome people who cannot contribute to society.

Besides the empirical challenges, physically disabled people in Laos are also hampered by academic challenges. The basic records and statistics of disability are heavily flawed for several reasons. As a result, literature and knowledge of disability studies in the Lao context are severely limited. Physically disabled people are often relegated to the background both in the academic and policy realm. They are often viewed as a liability to the state rather than interventions to expand their functioning and capabilities.

Marginalisation Studies

Social exclusion, also known as social marginalisation, is a social disadvantage. It is a concept popularised within the Western context and utilised across various subject areas, mainly economics, education, and sociology (Peace, 2003, p. 18). Social exclusion is when individuals are blocked from various rights, opportunities, and resources generally available to members of a different group and necessary for social integration. Social exclusion can be associated with a

person's social class, race, religion, ethnicity, educational status, gender, disability status, and more (Peace, 2003, p. 9).

One prominent example of social exclusion and disability employment in the Asian developing nation context can be referred to in the study of Hussain (2021). The author (2021, p. 15) stated that in Bangladesh, despite the government's effort to bring disability issues to the national development agenda and the establishment of various policies to facilitate employment for disabled people, it was a failure. Cultural and social barriers are significant hindrances to the employment of people with disabilities (Hussain, 2021, p. 15). Hussain (2021, p. 17) also stated that due to the cultural norms of gender inequality, disabled women are especially marginalised.

As a result of the stigma, disabled people are likely to be marginalised. Furthermore, families in Laos receive little or no benefits from officially registering a child as disabled (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 28). When a family hides a disabled member from authorities, it affects the Lao government's ability to improve legislation and living conditions and reduce overall prejudice because the total number and distribution of disabled people remain unclear (Hinton & Rutherford, 2014, p. 28)

Social exclusion can be categorised into two main types: individual exclusion and community exclusion. Social exclusion at the individual level results in an individual's exclusion from meaningful participation in society. An example of individual marginalisation is excluding individuals with disabilities from the labour force.

Disability and Marginalisation

Mizunoya and Mitra (2013) surveyed 15 developing countries, with Laos categorised as a low-income nation. According to the authors, the pattern for Laos is consistent with the general pattern, which states that there is an employment gap between people with disabilities and people without disability (Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013, p. 32). However, one interesting point was that women with disabilities have a better employment rate than men with disabilities in Laos (Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013, p. 34). This is interesting as it goes against the global debate on the gender dimension of employment and disability. The debate states that women with disabilities are less likely to be employed than their male counterparts.

Overall, from a macro-perspective, the general statistics showed a disparity between people with disabilities and people with no disability in the employment domain. The employment patterns of people with disabilities in Laos are unclear as there are insufficient studies on the topic.

Effects on the Employment Domain

The focus of this research is on the employment context. Hence, the effects of disability on the quality of employment and why there is high unemployment within the disabled population are analysed. Although no studies have been done on how disability has affected disabled people in employment, it is important to look at other nations for Laos.

In Australia, disability has been discovered to influence employment status significantly (Wilkins, 2004). Disability reduced the possibility of employment participation by one-quarter for men and one-fifth for women (Wilkins, 2004, p. 370). For men, disability decreased employment participation, mostly in the full-time domain; for women, disability has a detrimental impact on the two domains of full-time and part-time employment (Wilkins, 2004, p. 370). The findings demonstrated that the severity of the disability, the type of disability, and the age are all influential in negatively affecting the employment participation of disabled people (Wilkins, 2004, p. 371).

The Australian case demonstrated the case where the personal attributes of a disabled individual shape the consequences in the labour market. In this particular case, the severity, the type of disability, gender and age all influence the marginalisation experience in the employment domain.

Gender-Related Studies on Disability

According to the United Nations Women (2022), as a result of life-long discrimination and inequalities, older women with disabilities generally possess fewer savings and assets, which results in socio-economic marginalisation. Older women with disabilities are also subjected to higher levels of discrimination and human rights violations resulting from the combined negative effect of ageism and ableism (United Nations Women, 2022).

Literature on disability and gender in the global context generally argues that women with disability are more marginalised than their male counterparts (Maya Dhungana, 2006; Fine & Asch, 2018). For example, in Nepal, it was found that disabled women received less support from NGOs and the state and less access to training and employment compared to disabled men in the nation (Maya Dhungana, 2006, p. 141).

An Overview of the Laos labour market

The contemporary statistic elucidated that as of 2018, approximately one billion people are living with disabilities (WHO, 2020). However, most of the one billion people live in developing countries (WHO, 2020). The general pattern has stated

that individuals with a disability have lower employment rates and less job security (Yelin & Trupin, 2003; Schur, 2002, p. 341; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013).

According to the latest report of the Lao Statistics Bureau (2015), 160,881 people over five are classified as disabled. The majority of this number is identified as physically disabled. For employment, disabled individuals over the age of 10 had substantially lesser labour participation and a larger unemployment rate than their non-disabled counterparts. This is true in the context of both rural and urban areas. They were significantly less likely to acquire employment than their counterpart. This is shown in the fact that the unemployment rate was notably more significant within the disabled population at 4.01 per cent compared to the non-disabled population at 1.35 per cent.

In Laos, an estimated 75% of people with disabilities are of working age (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015, p. 34). Income generation and job security are significant issues. People with disabilities are less likely to be employed and are paid less for the same work. Most studies on disability and employment in Laos often rely on cross-sectional data, which had provided a solid foundation for marginalisation studies in Laos but lacked specific details (Yelin & Trupin, 2003; Schur, 2002, p. 341; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013; Khamvongsa & Russell, 2009).

However, cross-sectional data does not adequately account for the process and mechanisms through which the positioning of physically disabled people in comparison with their counterparts without disabilities emanates. This is why the life history approach adopted for this study comes in handy to incorporate multiple chains of deprivations into the analysis of disabled people in the labour market of Laos.

Negotiation of Marginalisation in the Employment Domain

The negotiation process of marginalisation in the context of this research refers to how disabled people are handling and adapting to the challenges in the labour market. More information is needed on the negotiation process in both the global and Lao contexts. Exploratory research conducted in 6 European countries found substantial room for improvement in catering to the needs of disabled employees, employers' responsibility, and workplace accommodation for disabled employees (Moody et al., 2017). Another study done in the Canadian context elucidated that many firms in Canada had put in place accommodation needs, adapted working hours, or job redesign for catering to disabled employees (Williams, 2006, p. 23).

The literature on the negotiation process mostly focuses on the workplace rather than the employee perspective (Moody et al., 2017; Williams, 2006). This means that there is significantly more data on the actions of workplaces and data on how disabled people are overcoming and adapting to the barriers. Another

vital point is that most literature is done within developed nations. It can be safely said that the challenges and barriers for disabled people in developing nations such as Laos can be considerably more severe. Therefore, the accommodation of workplaces and the negotiation process are more likely to differ than in developed nations.

Gaps in Previous Research on Labour Market-related Experiences of Physically Disabled People in Lao PDR

A comprehensive review of literature related to inclusive development in Laos was conducted (Thoresen et al., 2014). One of the main findings was that empirical literature related to disability in Lao PDR is severely lacking and limited. Furthermore, the authors (2014, p. 21) suggested that to improve accessibility in Laos, the voices and lived experiences of those with a disability must be included in all assessment and planning processes. Only then that social change concerning better social and economic participation will happen. This study aimed to enhance this claim by focusing on the voices and lived experiences of the disabled population.

Buchner (2011) identified three negative healthcare and health-seeking factors in Laos: cost, a negative cultural portrayal of disability, and the bureaucracy's overall complexity. Based on the main findings of Buchner (2011), there is a potential for further analysis concerning each of the stated factors. Hinton and Rutherford (2014) argued that environmental challenges, such as the lack of accessible infrastructure, roads, and societal challenges, mainly hamper disabled individuals in Laos.

Method and Research Site

This research is based on the interviews and ethnographic data acquired in Vientiane Capital and the Xiengkhuang province, Lao PDR, between March 2020 and May 2021. This study interviewed 12 Participants at their preferred location and the workplace of all the employed participants. In addition, this study conducted nine phone interviews. Furthermore, several more phone interviews were conducted with the family members of the participants. All participants in the study were chosen because they had a physical disability, regardless of the condition or severity level and causes of disability.

The participants were asked a variety of questions, both open-ended and closed-ended. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their experiences and perspectives on living with a disability. The closed-ended

questions allowed the researcher to collect more quantitative data, such as the Participants' employment status and the type of disability they have.

The data collected was used to understand the challenges and opportunities that people with disabilities face in their daily lives. The data also showed how disability can affect the employment prospects and employment settings of people with disabilities.

Table 1 shows the basic profile of the participants. The table includes the participants' age, gender, disability type, and employment status.

Table 1: Participant profile

Participant's label	Participant's number	Occupation	Sector	Disability type	Gender	Age	Marital status
Participant A	1	Administration	Private (NGO)	One-legged disabled	Women	35	Married
Participant B	2	Lawyer	Public	One-legged disabled	Men	48	Married
Participant C	3	Handicraft worker	Private (Company)	Both arms disabled	Women	25	Single
Participant D	4	Self-employed (Massage parlour)	Private (Self-employed)	Partially blind	Women	35	Married
Participant E	5	Unemployed (lives in rural Laos)	NA	One-legged disabled	Men	46	Married
Participant F	6	Unemployed (lives in rural Laos)	NA	One arm was disabled, and one eye was permanently blinded	Women	50	Married
Participant G	7	Unemployed (lives in rural Laos)	NA	Wheelchair-disabled	Women	33	Single
Participant H	8	Unemployed (lives in rural Laos)	NA	Wheelchair-disabled	Men	45	Single
Participant I	9	Administration	Private (NGO)	One-legged disabled	Men	46	Married
Participant J	10	Handicraft worker	Private (self-employed)	Wheelchair-disabled	Women	32	Single
Participant K	11	Unemployed (lives in Vientiane capital)	NA	Wheelchair-disabled	Men	43	Married
Participant L	12	Freelance painter	Private (self-employed)	Both arms disabled	Men	30	Single

Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was utilised for this research. Purposive sampling is a valuable tool for qualitative research. However, it is important to note that it is not a random sample, and the research results may not be generalisable to the wider population (Bryman, 2016, p. 201).

The sample for this research was based on the physical attribute that the individual must have a visible physical disability condition.

Positionality in Qualitative Research

The researcher's position is important in life history research, as it can influence the participants' responses. There were issues with the participant's perception of the researcher in this research. The researcher's perceived educational background gave the participants the impression that the researcher was well-off and could help them. This created a power imbalance, which made the Participants feel intimidated and less likely to speak freely. As a result, some of the responses may have been biased, as the Participants were trying to please the researcher or avoid saying anything that may seem aggressive.

The gender of the researcher also influenced the responses of some women Participants. In rural Laos, a strong traditional culture still emphasises male dominance. As a result, the women participants may have felt that they had to be more careful about what they said to the researcher, as they did not want to say anything that might be disrespectful or offensive.

Overall, the researcher's position as a well-educated man from a different culture influenced the participants' responses, particularly the women Participants. This is an important factor to consider when interpreting the research results.

In general, there were issues with power relations. The participants may have felt intimidated by the researcher's perceived educational background and financial status. This may have made them less likely to speak freely, as they did not want to say anything that might offend the researcher or make them look bad. There were also issues with gender relations. The women participants may have felt that they had to be more careful about what they said to the researcher, as they did not want to say anything that might be disrespectful or offensive. Rural Laos still has a strong traditional culture emphasising male dominance.

It is important to note that these are just some of how the researcher's positionality may have influenced the participants' responses. It is also possible that other factors, such as the participants' personal experiences, may have also played a role.

Research Ethics

One of the most important ethical principles of social research is the principle of informed consent (Bryman, 2016, p. 130). This principle is covered as all Participants were provided consent forms that were required to be signed before the interview. Participants were allowed to withdraw anytime during the interview should they want to.

Provided that this study utilised life history research, confidentiality is paramount. Besides the audio data, photos are also important. Hence, the participants were notified that some of the pictures would be utilised in a narrative sense. Participants were told that the interview would be recorded via a cell phone. Only Participant B wanted to remain confidential; hence Participant B had to be de-identified to ensure confidentiality.

One ethical issue emerged during the interview. There were issues of causing harm to some Participants. The notion of harm in the context of social research incorporates the notion of psychological harm, the main examples being stress and damage to self-esteem (Bryman, 2016, p. 135). Some questions asked in the interview were intended to investigate the experience of being maimed by a UXO accident, recalling a traffic accident, and recalling discrimination and marginalisation experiences, which can be very sensitive and traumatic.

Results and Discussion

The Negotiation Process in Contemporary Laos

The main finding was that there were generally five negotiation strategies to counter employment-based marginalisation. These include the strategy of specialisation, the strategy of diversification, the strategy of networking, the strategy of self-employment, and the strategy of family reliance. For this paper, the networking strategy adopted by Participant A and the strategy specialisation in combination with self-employment adopted by L is chosen for further analysis. Participant A and Participant L's life stories differ substantially and can provide a deep contrasting discussion. In addition, it is important to note that the strategy of specialisation was the most widely utilised, while the strategy of specialisation was among the least chosen strategy among the cohort of Participants. This means that the contrasting nature of the two strategies can provide a comparison point of discussion.

One of the emerging findings was how personal attributes and the environment greatly impacted the negotiation process and outcome. The personal attributes of the Participants include their personalities, their beliefs, and their values. These factors can influence how they approach the labour market and

make decisions. The environment in which the Participants live is also influential on the outcome. This includes factors such as the physical setting, the time constraints, and the presence of other people. Both the personal attributes and the environment in which the negotiation takes place can play a substantial role in shaping the outcome of the situation.

The Lived Experience of Participant A

The life story of Participant A demonstrated how her determined and cheerful outlook on employment, in combination with the right environment, can lead to an optimal outcome despite all the heavy setbacks presented in Laos. Participant A is an administrator at the Lao Disabled Women's Development Center, Vientiane Capital, Lao PDR.

Participant A suffered from a disability at birth, leading to her left leg loss. As a result, compared to other Participants, her experience of marginalisation is highly critical as she had lived a marginalised life since birth. Participant A said that she grew up in a poor rural household which had amplified her marginalisation experience due to the lack of infrastructure and serious difficulty in accessing quality healthcare. Her disability condition had made her suffer tremendously from marginalisation during her school years, her classmates constantly bullied her and even teachers physically and verbally. As a result, Participant A could only finish middle school provided it was nearly impossible to commute in muddy conditions, especially during the rainy season. Her decision to quit school had substantially limited her employment prospect as her education qualification is the equivalent of being lower than in high school.

Like most rural families in modern Laos, the poorer households tend to have big families for agriculture participation, and luckily Participant A's family was able to provide for her until she was able to migrate to Vientiane Capital. In comparison to other participants, her life turning point was relatively late.

Provided she has eight siblings, three of whom have migrated to Vientiane Capital for employment. One of the siblings was her elder brother, who married an employee at the Lao Disabled Women's Development Center (LDWDC). The Lao Disabled Women's Development Center (LDWDC) is a non-profit organisation staffed by and for disabled women. Foreign NGOs and various embassies sponsor the LDWDC, and the Lao Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour approves it. The LDWDC's mission is to assist people with disabilities in seeking employment and advocate for disabled women's rights in Laos (LDWDC, 2022). It is one of the few organisations assisting disabled women in Laos.

The life-changing figure for Participant A was her sister-in-law, who, through networking, could acquire employment for Participant A. At the time, the

Center was recruiting a new batch of students for a short-term vocational training program. Her sister-in-law, who worked in the HR department, recommended the program and paid for her trip to participate. The program offered various workshops organised and sponsored by different parties. Hence these workshops can provide disabled people with the opportunity to learn new skills, meet potential employers, and build relationships with other disabled people. For Participant A, this was her first ever to be in a disabled-friendly environment, as most trainers and trainees are physically disabled. It was the first opportunity for her to feel a sense of belonging as she was able to connect with other disabled people, share their experiences, and find job leads.

After completing the training, she successfully acquired the administration title at the Center. However, the acquisition was not made without ease because she had to wait more than six months for the job opening. During those six months, she volunteered at the Center while living under the financial support of her brother. When the job opened, everybody at the Center was well aware of her determination and enthusiasm, so she was selected.

Upon analysis, the challenges that Participant A had to overcome were highly complex. She had to overcome many social barriers and structural barriers due to her disability condition. Furthermore, being a lower-limb disabled person, the physical barriers, mainly difficulties in traversing, are substantially more impactful once compared to an upper-limb disabled person. Her chosen strategy of networking was an example of a successful case.

Instead of being antagonistic after a long history of being discriminated against and marginalised due to her disability, Participant A kept a positive outlook on her life, and the moment she participated in the program was the moment that led to her success.

It is important to note that networking is not a magical standard strategy that would work for every disabled person in Laos. However, it is a valuable tool that can help disabled people in their job search. By networking effectively, disabled people can increase their chances of finding employment shown in the lived experience of Participant A.

During her participation in the various workshops and during her time as a volunteer, she was prepared to talk about her disability instead of avoiding the topic. However, despite having little education, she mainly focused on her skills and her enthusiasm to learn new skills. She was mostly positive, enthusiastic, and always eager to work, although she was not getting paid then. Furthermore, it is vital to note that networking takes time and effort; the fact that she was persistent in being outside her hometown with no income for almost half a year elucidates her commitment and persistence.



Figure 2: Participant A at her work desk
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

Her determined and optimistic personality and the disabled-friendly environment were crucial to her success. She explained the various factors that led to her success.

Growing up in a poor rural household with a disability condition, I never had any ambition. Since I did not spend much time in school, I was instead spending time with my few close friends who live nearby, which helped me a lot in my networking skills as I spent more time talking to people rather than studying. With my circumstance, it is obvious that I struggled to have friends with the bullying I have received throughout my life; I only have a few close friends who care about me. I could choose to be bitter about my disability, but I choose not to because my family and my close friends give me hope; when my sister-in-law paid for my trip to participate in the program, I was overjoyed. During my time in the program, I talked to everyone I encountered. The environment was out of this way, coming from a rural background. Even after the program volunteered at the Center and helped everyone with their daily tasks while learning new essential skills, I can safely say that it was due to my networking skills that

I got this job because I have no education, but I was determined to show them how much I want to contribute to the organisation.

The Lived Experience of Participant L

The lived experience of Participant A demonstrated a case of success where her attributes and the environment had led to a successful negotiation process of employment-based marginalisation. Yet, it is important to analyse the opposite case to understand the overall negotiation process better. With that said, the lived experience of Participant L is chosen for a point of comparison. The main justification for this is that the strategy chosen and the outcome differ from that of Participant A. In addition, the fact that Participant L is a man would reflect a different marginalisation experience.

Unlike the cheerful personality of Participant A, Participant L is considerably more critical of his lived marginalised experience. One of the reasons for this is the fact that he became disabled later in his life. This means it would be more difficult for him to adapt to his disability condition, unlike Participant A, who was disabled at birth. The mental and psychological effects were considerably more impactful, provided he had to adapt to his disability during his teenage years.

Participant L encountered a fire accident at 16, losing his arms and hands. He was able to finish high school, and like Participant A, he was subjected to bullying and discrimination at school based on his disability condition.

The challenges of Participant L are also considerably different once compared to Participant A. On the one hand, as an upper-limb disabled person, the physical barriers are less significant as it is relatively easier for him to traverse and travel. On the other hand, the social barriers were considerably more significant; as a disabled man, he was physically abused at school.

Participant L had always been fond of fine arts and drawings. After finishing in Vientiane Capital, his first aspiration was to seek a degree in the IT domain. However, since he had no arms and hands, he was rejected. Like Participant A, Participant L came from a low-income family, meaning he could not afford to pay for education after high school.

Participant L essentially utilised two strategies. His initial strategy was to specialise in a very niche skill of drawing and painting without hands. After being rejected from a scholarship and rejected from getting a job in the IT domain, he knew that it would be nearly impossible to pursue his dream in the IT domain. He then changed his focus to fine arts and drawing. Participant L taught himself to specialise via online resources and practices in painting without hands and turned his disability into a selling point, a selling point that is uniquely rare in Laos.

Initially, he was painting shoes for a shop, but after gaining enough fame, he changed his strategy to self-employment. After some time, he could collect sufficient for his small business selling painted shoes and his paintings.

Unlike Participant A, he could not pursue his dream, but the alternative outcome was satisfactory. The negotiation process of Participant L is essentially the opposite of Participant A's negotiation process; he relied solely upon himself over networking.

Participant L recalled one important incident when he and his friend applied for a scholarship. The scholarship was available for disabled individuals to study IT as a vocational degree at a college in Vientiane Capital, his friend, who used a wheelchair, was able to finish the degree and was hired by an IT SME. One of the reasons cited for rejecting the scholarship was that the college perceived it to be too difficult for Participant A to study without hands.

An interesting point was found in comparing Participant A and Participant L. There is a strange phenomenon where in general, upper-limb disabled participants were more independent in daily life, yet lower-limb disabled participants generally were able to negotiate marginalisation in the employment domain. One of the main reasons for this is that there are more jobs that require the use of upper-limb in comparison to jobs that require the use of lower-limb.

Participant L said

As a young boy, I was always interested in drawings, and like most boys, your interest in computers increases as you age. I had a dream of working in the IT department of a company, so when I heard there was a scholarship specifically for disabled individuals to study IT in a college located in Vientiane Capital, it was a dream come true. I, along with one of my best friends who is wheelchair-bound from a traffic accident, went to apply, and I was rejected. The administrator simply rejected me on the spot, citing that the college is not equipped for such “cases” like mine.

Generally speaking, marginalisation experiences and employment context differences should be minimal. This is mainly because physically disabled people are mostly generalised as one group. As a result, it was argued that the effects of marginalisation for physically disabled people are essentially generalised (Babik & Gardner, 2021, p. 10). This is especially true in a developing nation like Laos, where the awareness of the disability concept is relatively low. As there is a lack of understanding and awareness, it is expected that the majority of the population tended to see the physically disabled as one homogeneous group regardless of the disability condition. However, the narratives have proven otherwise.



Figure 3: Participant L painting
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

Comparison of the Negotiation Process

Participant A and Participant L's life stories demonstrated how personal attributes, the personal environment, and selected actions could determine very different outcomes. The significance of personal attributes is consistent with the literature that has stated personal attributes such as gender and disability type.

All participants encounter the same challenges; however, the particular individuals' attributes, personal environment, and strategy can significantly alter the outcome. The two most significant factors of personal attributes are the severity of disability and gender.

The participants' environment is also highly influential in determining the negotiation process. All participants had a notably negative experience of physical and mental discrimination; this reflects the reality of contemporary Laos, where the environment is far from inclusive for physically disabled people. However, it is vital to note that the support from their family, surrounding society, and where the participants grew up were diverse. Hence, certain Participants benefited from a hostile personal environment while some suffered from a hostile personal environment.

The gender factor in Contemporary Laos

One of the most surprising findings was the influence of gender. The interviews have yielded an unconventional finding where disabled women were able to

negotiate marginalisation better. For that reason, this particular finding needs to be further analysed.

Bend and Fielden (2021) argued that disabled women employees encounter many distinct challenges consisting of discriminatory barriers such as being imposed with the same standard and expectations of their male non-disabled employees. There were also discriminatory physical barriers, such as the lack of accessible facilities restricting them from full employment participation. Once focused on the closest Lao neighbour, Thailand, the trend is similar to the global trend. Physically disabled women in Thailand are hampered by physical restrictions, mainly inaccessible infrastructure and facilities, attitudinal restrictions caused by the general population, particularly employers, and even over-protection from families regarding their employment opportunities and participation (Bualar, 2014). The author asserted that this situation is due to the non-disabled community ignoring the potential of these women and proposed that there should be more cooperation and efforts from the Thai government and NGOs for policy interventions in directing the specific medical, social, and legal domain of restricted participation in the labour market to improve the employment prospects of physically disabled women (Bualar, 2014, p. 198).

The interviews have shown a division between disabled men and disabled women in the employment domain of Laos. However, surprisingly, generally speaking, disabled women are less marginalised in the employment domain in Laos, thus contradicting the global debate of literature, which argues that disabled women are generally more marginalised (Bualar, 2014; Bend & Fielden, 2021).

It has been stated that the significant majority of the disabled population in Laos is significantly marginalised in the education domain (Inui, 2020). Laos was ranked third in Southeast Asia regarding the number of children with school-citing disability as one of the main reasons (Inui, 2020, p. 77). The findings have confirmed this trend as all but Participant B (public lawyer) had higher education. Being marginalised in the education domain is strongly linked to the marginalisation domain as the opportunity to acquire a proper paying job is significantly reduced; for the Lao context, it seems that sewing, making handicrafts, and massage are all suitable and viable for physically disabled individuals as the education requirement is not high. These three vocations are domestic-based and, therefore, more suitable for women.

For instance, sewing and handicraft, as illustrated by the life story of Participant C, are traditionally domestic and light vocations that women generally engaged in; the same can be said for the massaging industry. With all that said, it is safe to say the conditions are more favourable for disabled women to negotiate employment and marginalisation in the contemporary Lao context.

For the blind community in Laos, owning a small massage parlour is the only option for self-employment. Participant D said

I was lucky to have received some massage training, worked, and saved up to open a small massage parlour. My competitive advantage is that the parlour is fully owned and operated by blind people. It is common sense that massaging is practised mainly by women likewise can be said for the blind community, and I guess I am lucky. Being blind means you are very restricted in terms of education, and the only realistic option in the current Lao environment is to practice massage, which I can say is tougher for men.



Figure 4: Participant D at her massage parlour
(Source: Fieldwork, 2022).

The specific strategies differed for the Participants, but the general trend illuminated that they tended to rely on the state for little assistance. In the global context, this is illogical as literature has stated that the state and the government should play a central role in improving the lives of disabled people (Rubaii-Barrett & Wise, 2008, p. 53; Colon-Cabrera et al., 2021). Laos is a one-party communist state where the government essentially controls all affairs, which should mean the state's role is significant. However, the findings have shown that this was not the case here; it was almost the opposite.

Conclusion

The negotiation process to counter the employment-based marginalisation of disabled individuals in Laos varied substantially. Various factors are in play for determining how successful disabled individuals navigate thru the Laotian labour market; two main factors are personal attributes and environment. The difference in gender and disability type also substantially influences the negotiation process and the outcome. Surprisingly disabled women in Laos can better navigate the Laotian labour market.

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