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Original Research Article

PREVALENCE OF DISABILITY IN OMAN: STATISTICS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

People with disabilities are among the most vulnerable groups all over the world. They have limited access to education, services, and employment. People with disabilities represent about 2.3% of the Omani population and the number is increasing. The research work was divided into three parts. The first part was a descriptive/interpretive analysis aiming to provide an outline of the current and relevant literature with regard disability statistics and challenges worldwide. The second part aims to examine the state of disability and its demographics in Oman. The paper analyzes government legislations, major cause of disabilities, and the current initiatives of the Omani government to remedy the problems faced by disabled people in the country. Finally, the paper concludes with a set of recommendations suggesting ways to enhance the services provided for this group of population to integrate them in the society. The major findings of this study, despite the government effort in this regard, people with disabilities face a number of challenges as they lack basic services necessary to improve the quality of life and there is no updated statistics on the state of disability in Oman. This study will provide the foundations that might help the government and non-government organizations, disability researchers, and health professionals in devising a strategy for the integration of the disabled into Omani society.

Keywords: Disability, Impairment, Oman, Oman Census 2003, Disability Legislation, Oman Statistics

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1. INTRODUCTION

About 650 million people in the world live with disabilities of various types, and the number is growing due to a rise in chronic diseases, injuries, road accidents, violence, aging, and other such factors(World Health Organization, 2005). This number makes up approximately 10% of the world population. Of disabled population, nearly 80% live in low-income countriesand are poor and have limited or no access to basic services including rehabilitation

facilities. The number of persons with recognized disabilities in industrialized countries is between 8% and 20%, and on the other hand, developing countries often acknowledge much lower percentages officially (World Health Organization, 2003).

People with disabilities suffer from discrimination throughout the world, especially in the developing countries, and are frequently excluded from social, economic, and political processes in their societies. Disability was long considered an individual problem that was treated from a medical and charitable viewpoint, but neglected in terms of equal rights for disabled persons (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). Now disability has been recognized as a major social issue internationally, and the World Health Organization (WHO) is putting together great efforts to assist countries in developing policies for people with disabilities, ensuring early identification and treatment, providing equal opportunities, and promoting rights of the disabled people (World Health Organization, 2005).

1.1 Defining Disability

Disability has different definitions depending on (national) social legislation and cultural standards. The definition of disability also varies according to the purpose for which it is being used, such as health care, rehabilitation, income protection, employment, and social assistance (ESCWA, 2010). Moreover, what is considered a disability in one country may not be perceived and labelled as such elsewhere (e.g., mental disability or female infertility). This variation makes it more difficult to establish reliable data on the number of the disabled people (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006).

World Health Organization's definition formulated in 1976 is currently most widespread, which draws a three-fold distinction between impairment, disability and handicap, "An impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function; a disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being; a handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that prevents the fulfilment of a role that is considered normal (depending on age, sex and social and cultural factors) for that individual" (World Health Organization, 1978). Mann in his book on Smart Technology for aging, disability, and independence defined disability as "a limitation in performing tasks, activities, and roles to levels expected within physical and social contexts. A person may have difficulty dressing (task), but this could be due to cognitive impairment, vision impairment, or motor impairment, each of which would require a different compensatory strategy" (Mann, 2005). According to Oman's Ministry of National Economy a disabled person is "a person who is suffering from a shortage of some of its sensory or physical or mental moral, genetic factor, or disease, or accident, limiting his/her ability to perform his/her natural role in life compared to those in his/her age, and it constitutes all the needed care and rehabilitation until he/she can do their role in life" (Ministry of National Economy, 2008).

1.2 Importance of Disability studies:

Disability studies are imperative and in many developed countries, disability rights activists grabbed the attention of the society to the numerous social, cultural, economic, and political barriers faced by many people with impairments. Increasingly, such movements have gathered support for disabled people around the world and, many campaigns have influenced governments' disability policy (Colin & Geof, 2010). On the other hand, people with disabilities in some of the developing countries are still deprived of their basic rights of education, health, and housing. Therefore, disability research on various issues (e.g.,

economic, social, education, employment, and health) will educate and inform policy makers to initiate health programs and take measures that can provide remedy to reduce the burden of disability (Sangram, 2009).

In Oman, according to the 2003 Ministry of National Economy Census there were about 41,303 people with various types of disabilities (Ministry of National Economy, 2010b). However, there is a lack of reliable information on the number of people with disabilities. Thus, this article aims at analysing the state of disability in Oman, which can help policy makers, government and non-government agencies, and disability researchers in understanding the impact of disability on the economical and social development in the country. The paper offers a deeper understanding of the disability issue in Oman by analyzing disability legislation, causes of disability, and the government's initiatives against disability. Recommendations for coping with the issue effectively are also made.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2003 WHO report estimated that about 80% of people with disability are from developing countries (World Health Organization, 2003). The day-to-day activities of 25% of the world's population are affected by disability, which affects entire families, not just the individual. It is argued that between 14% and 34% of children in developing countries have some sort of disability according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and 8% of the world's disabled population live in low-income countries; a majority of them are poor and cannot access basic services including rehabilitation facilities (The United Nations Children's Fund, 2009). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the death rates among children with disabilities are 80% and that 98% of kids with disabilities in developing countries are not enrolled in schools. This limitation considerably reduces opportunities for their training and employment (UNESCO, 2009).

Disability is caused by numerous factors, such as disease, malnutrition, incorrect treatment or non-treatment, violence and war, accidents due to inadequate protection at the workplace and in road accidents, and increasingly age-related diseases. People with disabilities suffer from discrimination throughout the world and are frequently excluded from social, economic, and political processes in their societies (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). A report by Economic and Social Commission For Western Asia (ESCWA) claimed that countries of the ESCWA region have very low disability rates in contrast to other regions (ESCWA, 2010). For example, this region shows a disability rate of 0.5% in Saudi Arabia, 0.6% in Egypt, 1.9% in Yemen, and 4.8% in Sudan; which is very low considering the population in these countries; causing doubt about the truth of these statistics. However, this might be understandable since these communities consider disability as a source of shame or disgrace. Also, this situation arises due to the narrow description for impairments in surveys and censuses, which mainly focus on the most severe types of disability like blindness and deafness rather than activity-limiting disabilities like learning difficulties and psychiatric disorders. It is argued by people with disabilities that if culture, physical environment, and attitudes towards them change then the effect of their disabilities would be reduced. As a result, there will be equality in the society. This can be achieved by providing them easy access and better facilities in doorways, corridors, toilet facilities, parking spaces, and other such benefits. Also, support such as flexible work schedules will help this segment of the society to overcome strict rules, protocols, and procedures in the workplace. In addition, attitudes toward disabled people must be changed because people

may adopt a discriminatory attitude by considering them not as talented as normal persons (Disabled Living Foundation, 2006).

Thus, in developed countries such as the USA, a number of disabled rights legislations have been introduced by the federal government such as Section 508 of public law 99-506 (Federal Discrimination Law), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and Public Law 101-336 (U.S. Department of Justice). These laws establish guidelines for access to electronic equipment in the federal workplace. These laws also help the disabled by providing funds to the States in their efforts to improve access for people with disabilities, to support individual research projects, and to provide graduate fellowships for people with disabilities (Glinert & York, 1992).

In Oman, according to the Ministry of National Economy, there are nearly 41,303 persons reported disabled in 2003 Census (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a), and only about 23% of the total number of people with disabilities have been admitted to different rehabilitation centers. It is important to note that there are no statistics since 2003 about the number of disabled people in Oman while it is estimated that the number is increasing dramatically. There are about 37 rehabilitation centres across the country (see Table 1). However, it is important to note that these centres/associations have twofold objectives. Some of them provide help to disabled people to improve their quality of life and enable them to live independently. They also provide basic educational and vocational training to help them integrate in the society. While the main concern of the other associations, as indicated in Table 1 (Oman Disabled Welfare Association and Al-Noor Association for Blind), is to call for the rights of people with disability and promote awareness about their rights.

Table 1. Centers/Associations for the disabled and the beneficiaries, 2008

Center/Association	Number	Beneficiaries
Al-Wafa Social Voluntary Centre	22	2,167
Disabled Welfare and Rehabilitation Centre	1	125
Disabled Children Welfare Association	9	431
Association of Early Intervention	1	128
Oman Disabled Welfare Association	1	130
Al-Noor Association for Blind	3	74
Total	37	3,055

Source: *(Ministry of National Economy, 2010b)

There are a number of barriers concerning the studies about people with disabilities in Oman that are including a lack of:

- Clear and specific statistics on the number of people with disabilities, types of their special needs, and causes of such disabilities.
- Vocational training program for the youth with disabilities in order to help them to join the workforce and work independently. As indicated in Table 1, a big number of centers are Community Based Training (CBR) and the personnel who work in these centers are volunteers who lack the necessary skills in dealing with people with special needs.
- Human and financial resources in these centers as most of the people working there are volunteers with little or no experience about how to deal with people with special needs.

These centers lack financial resources, which is crucial to provide better facilities for people with disabilities (e.g., Information Technology).

- Awareness and acceptance of the disabled.
- Empowerment for disabled people by giving them equal access to opportunities and the development of technologies to compensate for physical impairment.

Disability demographics in Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is administratively divided into 5 regions and four governorates with 61 *Wilayats* (or districts). The regions are: Ad-Dakhliyah, Ash Sharqiyah, Al-Batinah, Adh-Dhahirah, and Al-Wusta, and the governorates are: Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam and Al-Buraymi (Ministry of Health, 2009). According to mid-year census for 2009, the Omani population is about 3.17 million of which 2.01 million were Omanis and 1.15 million were expatriates. (Ministry of Health, 2009). The proportion of population below 15 years of age is 34.5%. Females aged 15 to 49 years represent 58.3% of the total female population and the fertility rate is 3.9. According to (Nour, 2005), the population projections for countries in the MENA region indicates that the number of children will increase by about 30% and this expansion will be faster in countries such as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, and Oman.

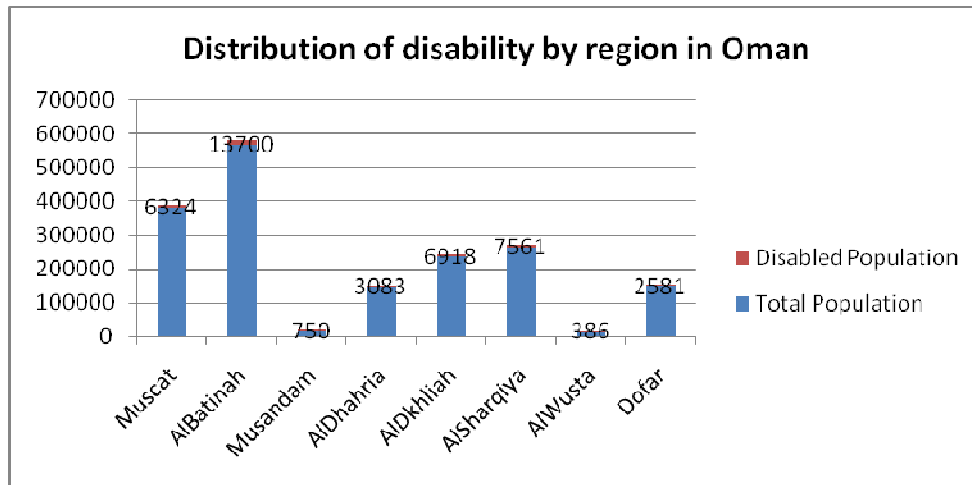


Figure 1. Disability by region

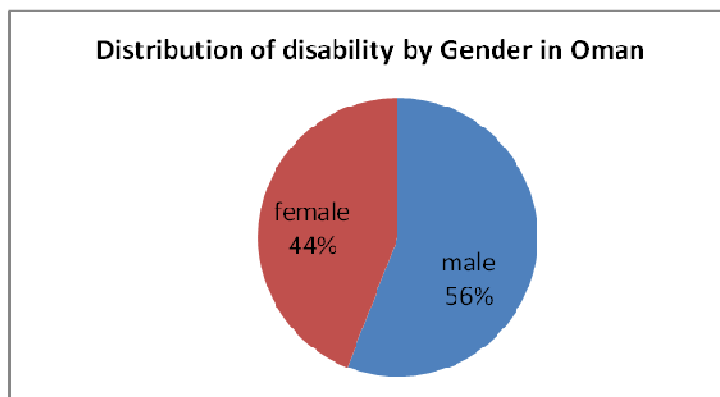


Figure 2. Disability by gender

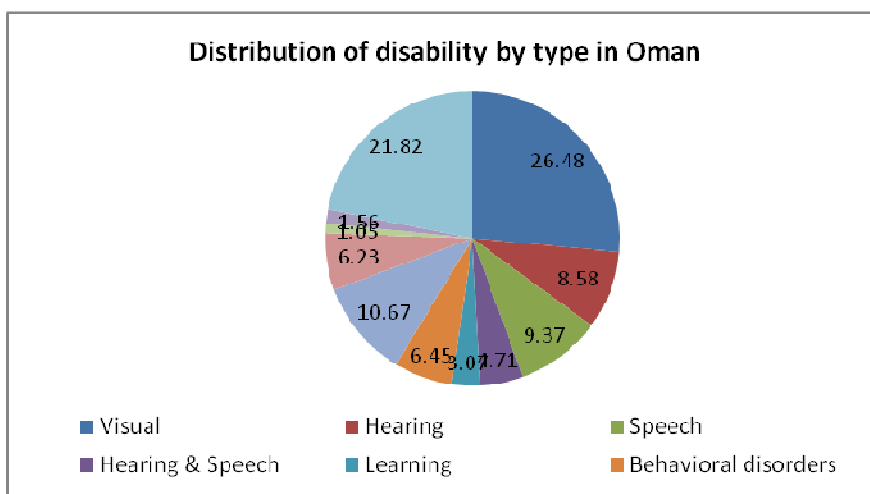


Figure3. Types of disabilities in Oman

Moreover, according to gender distribution 56% were males and 44% were females (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a). Among the disabled in Oman, visually disabled individuals were the largest (26.5%) followed by people with movement impairments (10.7%) and speech disability (9.37%).

As mentioned in section 2.2, it was estimated that the total number of disabled people in Oman is about 41,303 according to the 2003 census. Since there is no data consistency with regards to the number of people with disability from the years 2003, 2006, and 2010, the authors used the total population data for 2003, 2006, and 2009 from the Ministry of National Economy (2010) and then calculated the population growth rate for these three years. Based on the population growth rate, the total number of disabled people was estimated. In addition, the growth rate for the years 2010-2015 was predicted from the United Nations (2008) figures by calculating the population and the number of disabled in Oman for the year 2012, as depicted in Table 2. By looking at the predicted data, we can assume that the government must give special attention to this segment of the society.

Table2. Population to Disability ratio

	2003	2006	2009	2012
Population	*2,341,000	*2,577,000	*3,174,000	3,357,000
Growth Rate	NA	10.08 %	23.17%	NA
Annual Growth Rate	NA	3.36%	7.72%	**1.92%
No. of Disabled People	41,303	45,467	56,002	59,228

Source: *(Ministry of National Economy, 2010b), **United Nations, 2008

3. DISABILITY LEGISLATIONS

3.1 Disability legislations Worldwide

In Australia, the Equal Opportunity Act of 1984 was enacted by the Australian government to protect its citizens against certain discriminations, such as sexual, racial, age-related,

and disability discrimination. The Act also appointed a Commissioner for Equal Opportunity who was charged with overseeing the implementation of this law (Equal Opportunities Act, 1984). In 1992, the Australian Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed as a broad piece of legislation that attempts to label and outlaw any form of discrimination against any kind of disability (Disability Discrimination Act, 1992). The act enforces fair and equal treatment for those with disabilities in areas such as education, employment, and housing, and access to premises, clubs, sports or other gatherings. The Australian Human Rights Commission enforces the Disability Discrimination Act and it covers those with physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological, and learning disabilities, as well as individuals with physical disfigurements or disease-causing organisms. The act also covers family members or others connected to the disabled.

In the UK, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995 by the Parliament. DDA is an act that makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled persons in connection with employment, the provision of goods, facilities and services or the disposal or management of premises; to make provision about the employment of disabled persons; and to establish a National Disability Council (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995). In the United States, Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice) of 1990 was introduced as a wide-ranging legislation intended to make American society more accessible to the people with disabilities. The Act is divided into five titles: employment, public service, public accommodation, telecommunication, and miscellaneous.

In 1993, the UN General Assembly adopted "Standard Rules" for establishing equal opportunities for disabled people, which were developed along the lines of the World Program of Action. The Standard Rules provide a universal framework for activities to integrate the rights of persons with disabilities into national legislation. However, the "Standard Rules" are not binding beyond their significance as a political guideline, which means that the needs and rights of disabled persons are still not sufficiently reflected in many national and international development strategies (United Nations Enable, 1993). The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol was adopted on 13 December 2006 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and was opened for signature on 30 March 2007. The purpose of the present Convention was to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all people with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. There are currently 147 signatories and 99 ratifications of this convention (United Nations Enable, 2011).

3.2 Disability legislations in Oman

Oman has made headway in passing laws and regulations for the social welfare of disabled people. In 2008, a royal decree was introduced to publicize the law on the care and rehabilitation of disabled people where the Ministry of Social Development supervises and regulates the needed actions. Also, the decree announced the establishment of the National Committee for the Welfare of Disabled People. This committee is responsible to study and prepare a general plan for the care and rehabilitation of people with disabilities in Oman. The committee develops special programs for rehabilitation, care, employment, and development of the disabled, as well as promotes plans and programs for the awareness of all types of disability and its possible prevention. In addition, hardware and compensatory rehabilitation tools imported by rehabilitation centres and disabled individuals are exempted from customs duties. Also, the activity requirements of the rehabilitation centres are exempted from taxes

and fees. Moreover, the government is working on the preparation and training of disability specialists for early detection of disabilities and provision of appropriate assistance and services for handicapped people (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). Some benefits/services are assured by law to disabled people, which will be discussed in details in the coming sections, such as medical care, rehabilitation, counselling, employment, training, financial security, and others.

The government provides health care and treatment to the disabled including rehabilitation and assistive devices that help them in movement, education, training, and other daily life activities. Also, the government helps families having disabled persons who cannot afford to buy assistive equipment on their own. With regards to educational services for the disabled, Omani government is obligated to provide education appropriate to the physical and mental state of disabled people. Also, they are eligible for appropriate professional qualifications and certificates awarded to them from the rehabilitation centres support them in the labour market. Any public or private organization that holds fifty workers or more are obliged by law to hire qualified disabled persons nominated by the Ministry of Manpower. For the benefit of public services, the government ensures smooth access to public places, roads, buildings, religion places, markets, car parking, and areas that might be visited by the disabled. Moreover, the government improved the public transportation to facilitate their movement in the society. Finally, the government is committed to facilitate disabled people in social activities, sports and cultural work as well as to ensure their participation in local, regional, and international camps/sports competitions (Ministry of Social Development, 2011).

4. AN OVERVIEW ON CAUSES OF DISABILITIES IN OMAN

There are numerous studies available worldwide (in developed as well as developing countries) regarding the causes of death, but very few such studies are available on the causes of disability in developing countries. The causes of disabilities vary according to various age group (working age and older age) and gender (Sangram, 2009). According to international agencies, governmental departments, and non-governmental sources the major causes of disability include heredity, birth defects, lack of care during pregnancy and child birth, insalubrious housing, natural disasters and accidents, illiteracy and the resulting lack of information available on health services, congenital diseases, malnutrition (Muhammad et al., 2010), marriage between close relatives, respiratory diseases, metabolic diseases diabetes (Huma et al., 2011), kidney failure etc.), drugs and alcohol, old age, poliomyelitis, and measles (Sangram, 2009)

According to the 2003 census, one-third of the causes of disability in Oman were congenital reasons and about 15% of the disabilities were caused by age. Statistics also revealed that one-fifth of congenital disabilities were speech difficulty, 18.4% were categorized under other types of difficulties, and 12% were vision difficulties. Furthermore, of the disabilities caused by illnesses, one-third was vision difficulty, 27.5% were other difficulties, and 11% were mobility difficulties. Car accidents on the other hand accounted for 3% of disabilities in 2003 (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a). Children of parents with familial relationships have higher risk of inheriting from each of their parents a matching faulty gene that could result in some form of disability. It was estimated by the Centre for Genetics Education (2007) that 2 to 3% of blood-related parents had a risk of having a kid with a disability or a genetic birth defect. If parents are first cousins, the threat is almost two-times, about 5% to 6%. In Oman, about 36% of marriages were between first and second cousins, and additional 20.4% of the marriages were within members of the same tribe, which makes a total of 56.5% of the population (Rajab, 2000). This justifies the huge percentage of 34.3% of congenital disability rate in Oman (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a).

Road accidents are considered to be another main cause of disabilities in Oman. Every year, according to the statistics, 1.2 million people are known to die in road accidents worldwide. Millions of others sustain injuries with some suffering permanent disabilities. No country is free of this death toll, especially among the youth. Thus, enormous human resources is being destroyed, which leads to grave social and economic consequences (World Health Organization, 2004). According to statistics by the Ministry of Health (2009), about 20% of total deaths of children in Oman were caused by road accidents. It is predictable that road accidents every year cause around 500 deaths and more than 6000 injuries. Almost 7,570 road accidents occurred in Oman in the year 2010 (see Table 3), where 2,896 accident were only in Muscat governorate (Al-Rajhi, 2011).

Table 3. Road accidents for the year 2010

Road Accident	Total	Percentage
Collision between vehicles	3,441	45.5
Run over	1,091	14.4
Loss of control	1,160	15.3
Hitting into solid objects	1,879	24.8
Total accidents	7,571	100%

5. CHALLENGES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE IN OMAN

5.1 Education

Despite the continuous effort to raise the level of education in Oman and the government’s strategy to minimize the illiteracy at all ages and gender, yet a huge percentage of illiteracy is prevails among people with disability (ages 15 years and above). According to the 2003 census (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a), 75% of disabled people were illiterate and almost 55.6% of them had already reached the age of 60 or above. However, only 24.4% were in the age group of 15-24 years. Another important point is that females represent a higher percentage in illiteracy and the majority of them come from Al-Batinah region as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 4 below presents the distribution of people with special needs by education level. It is clear from the figure that a huge percentage of disabled people are illiterate and those who were fortunate to get some education beyond high school are only 1.7% male and 0.9% female. In fact, higher education is very crucial to have a decent life and be part of the labour force in most of the scenarios (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a).

It is important to note that major attempts were made to integrate children with special needs in public schools since 2000-2001 academic year. According to the Ministry of Education, two educational programs are offered by the ministry: Learning Difficulties Program and Special Needs Integration Programs. Learning Difficulties Program offers special educational courses for students with disabilities in government schools rather than sending them to specialized schools. The program was launched in two schools in 2000, by the academic year 2006-2007 it was successfully integrated in 178 schools all over the Sultanate. Special Needs Integration Programs was launched in 2005-2006 as separate classes in public schools, and these classes were reserved for students with hearing and intellectual disabilities. The program started in two schools in Al-Batina and Al-Sharqiyia regions, and by year 2006-2007, it had covered other four regions (Ministry of Education Portal, 2011).

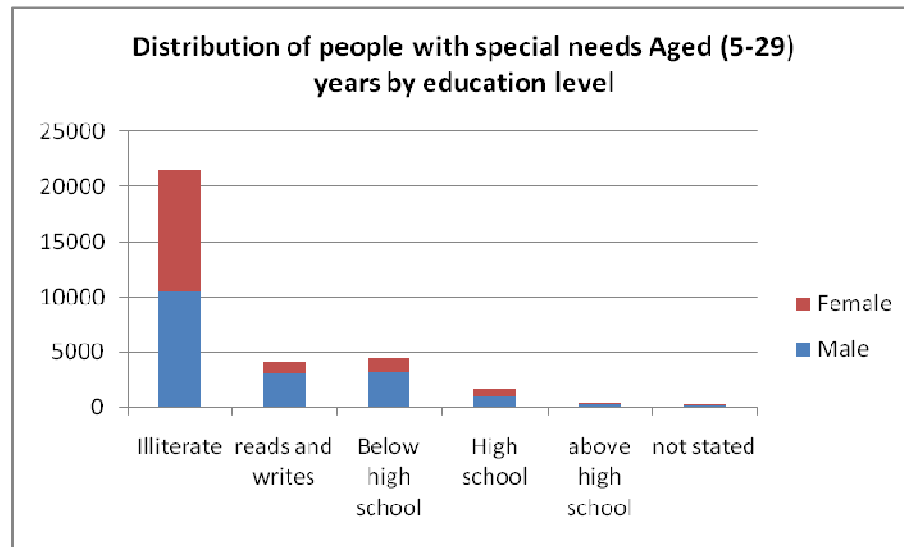


Figure 4: Disabled people distribution by education level

However, there were only three specialized schools for children with special needs, and all of them are located in Muscat governorate. As shown in Figure 5 below, people with visual, speech, or both disabilities are most fortunate when it comes to education, because the current specialized schools are only equipped to support these types of disabilities. It is important to note that in order to provide education to people with other types of disabilities; specialized schools, equipment, and human resources are required. The schools should also be set up in other regions in Oman, not only Muscat, so that less advantaged children could be educated. Proper education and training will increase their chances of integration in the community and will help them seek their rights. These steps will lead the country to stability and social development.

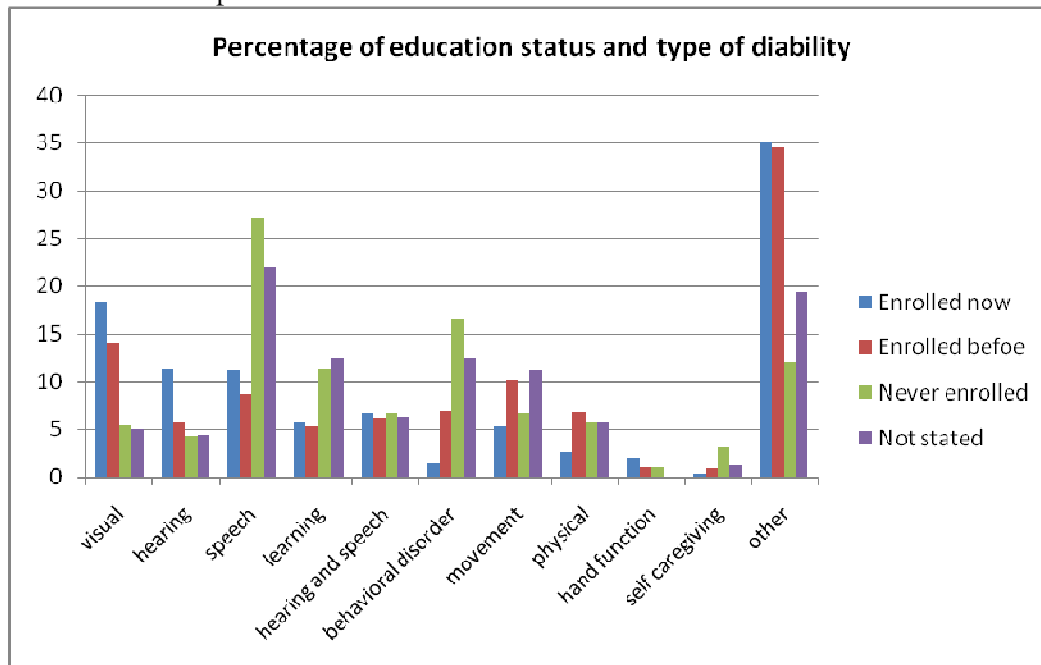


Figure 5. Education and types of disability

5.2 Employment

People with disability represent approximately one-sixth of the working age population globally (Bruyère & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 2000). In Oman, according to the 2003 census (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a), disability has a major impact on the economy of the Sultanate. It was evident that 15.7% of people with disability were active economically (i.e., they can have jobs and be independent) and about 65% were unable to do any type of job. Once again female contribute less, only 5% compared to 24% males who can actively involve themselves in labour force.

The public sector is playing a great role in employing people with disability as compared to other types of work sectors. Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of the disabled in various sectors. Section 17 of Oman’s Labour Law states that “people with disability should be employed in both public and private sectors,” and it clearly necessitates the employer, who employs 50 or more employees, to offer job opportunities according to skills and abilities of a certain number of disabled persons. As a follow-up, the Ministry of Manpower remains in contact with the private sectors to enforce the law (Ministry of Social Development, 2011).

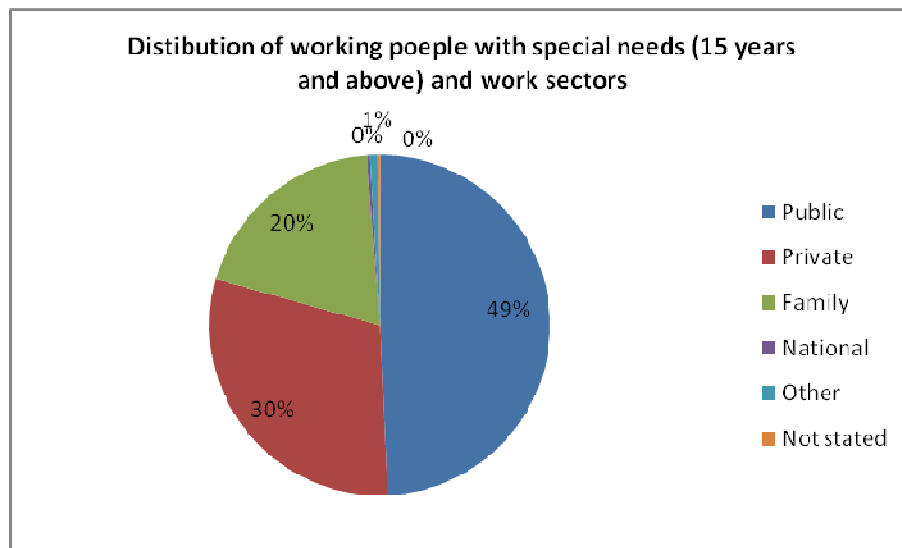


Figure 6. Distribution of people with disability and work sectors

6. GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO REMEDY DISABILITY PROBLEMS IN OMAN

The government of Oman is making great efforts to fulfil the needs of people with disabilities. The government has adopted and implemented a number of laws to ensure equal opportunities for disabled people. Provision of special education and rehabilitation services in Oman is shared by the Ministry of Education with a special education division that was established in 1974, the Ministry of Social Development and Manpower, the Ministry of Health, and non-governmental organizations. In the following sub-section, each government entity’s role with regards to catering the needs of people with disabilities is discussed in details.

6.1 Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education is providing educational services for children with special needs, both in special schools and in integrated educational facilities. The Ministry established a

Special Education Division in 1974. There are only three specialized education schools in Oman: one is for children with hearing impairments which was established in 1978 and another for children with cognitive impairments that were set up in 1985. The third specialized education, named Omar bin Al-Khattab for the blind, was established in 2000 (Ministry of Education Portal, 2011). This institute is accompanied by a technology center to train students in basic IT skills. The ministry is also running other educational programs for students with special needs, such as Learning Difficulty Programs and Integration Program with normal schools. With regards to higher education, students with mobility-related disabilities can be enrolled at any institution of higher education in the Sultanate. However, the blind get very limited options at Sultan Qaboos University since the College of Arts is the only College that caters for the needs of blind students. In some other cases, students are sent to the neighboring countries, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt for further education and rehabilitation.

6.2 Ministry of Social Development

The Ministry of Social Development established a Directorate for Special Care in 1980 with the primary purpose of improving services for persons with disabilities, elderly people, and juvenile rehabilitation. The main responsibilities of this directorate include: setting up vocational rehabilitation centres, offering rehabilitation personnel preparation programs, adopting policies and regulations in relation to employment of persons with disabilities, and supervising and coordinating national efforts for vocational training and integration of people with disabilities into community life (Ministry of Social Development, 2011). The directorate has amended labour, civil service, government pension, social security, and social insurance laws to protect the rights of the disabled. In this regard, major amendments made so far are as follows: (a) promoting accessibility to public buildings, (b) providing assistance for purchasing individual means of transportation, (c) supporting the participation of persons with disabilities in cultural activities and sports, (d) providing financial support for adapting homes for persons with disabilities, (e) offering social security benefits and pensions for unemployed individuals and their families, and (f) promoting the employability of the disabled in the public and private sectors (Hadidi, 1998; Ministry of Social Development, 2011).

The Sultanate of Oman is gradually realizing the importance of community-based rehabilitation (CBR), and thus, it was adopted as a strategy to address the increasing number of people with disability with various demographic characteristics and geographical location in order to reach a larger number of people with disabilities (Ministry of Social Development, 2011). Therefore, a number of CBR centres were founded in the 1980s in several governorates. Al-Wafa centres are one of the key CBR initiatives and it has 22 branches all over the Sultanate, which accommodates over 2,000 children of age group 3-14 years and has 234 volunteer workers. These CBR centres function to improve the quality of life for disabled children so that they can integrate easily with the society (Ministry of Social Development, 2011). Some recent significant achievements for the social and economic development of this segment of society is the outcome of collaboration between Information Technology Authority (ITA), Oman International Bank, and Oman Arab Training Institute. A major achievement was training hearing and speech impaired persons to be certified trainers on the program International Cambridge Diploma for Information Technology Skills (AlRoya, 2011).

6.3 Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Health has been involved in prevention of disability and provision of health services to people with disabling conditions. The Ministry collaborates with some agencies of

the UN in developing programs for disease prevention and control, comprehensive health care, environmental health, and development of women (Hadidi, 1998). With regards to road accidents issue that resulted in a significant number of people with disabilities, Oman with other countries has brought up the issue of road safety to the UN General Assembly and played a major role in raising global awareness to the growing impact of deadly road traffic injuries, especially in the developing world. The magnitude of the problem encouraged the UN General Assembly to adopt a special resolution (No. 58/9) on this issue and the WHO declared the year 2004 as the year of road safety (World Health Organization, 2004).

7. DISCUSSION

In the last 40 years, Oman has made remarkable development in various fields, such as social, economic, health, education as well as technology. Although there have been a significant investment in human resource development in general, the Sultan of Oman has recently granted 100 million Omani Riyals for human resource development programs for Omanis enabling them to pursue higher education in specialized areas (e.g., Medicine, Engineering, Information Technology, and Economics) or those needs in the society (Oman News Agency, 2010). Yet the people with special needs are underrepresented in all these plans. Oman lacks qualified professionals who can deal with issues faced by people with special needs. Technologies are now helping the disabled to participate in society more fully and exert great control over their own future. Technical advances and the continuing convergence of computing and telecommunication are reducing barriers and many people have benefited from them, but for people with disabilities the impact is more profound. The increasing range of assistive devices, from low-technology self-care mobility devices through the high technology "smart homes" are all contributing to minimize and well manage a "disabling condition" (Mann, 2005).

8. CONCLUSION

Despite the government efforts to enforce law and develop awareness about disabilities as well as to improve the quality of life of the disabled people, a significant number of them are underrepresented in education, employment, health, and other facilities. Those who are fortunate get a chance to receive basic education (only for those with learning difficulties, visual impairment or hearing impairment), but the majority of them do not get a chance to pursue higher education. The fortunate ones (who receive basic education) are very few compared to the total number of people with disabilities in Oman.

A major challenge in this study that the authors faced was the lack of up-to-date statistics on people with disability in Oman as the most recent resource is the 2003 census (Ministry of National Economy, 2010a). In addition, there is no information on what services/facilities are available for disabled persons and where these services are located. This paper, however, provided some insight about the state of disabilities in Oman and offered an overview of a number of issues, such as the demographics, legislation, and day-to-day problems regarding disabilities in the Omani society. The paper explored some of the causes of disabilities in Oman and highlighted the issue of traffic accidents, which has become a prime cause of disabilities recently. The paper also discussed the government initiatives to overcome these problems through coordinated efforts of various ministries. It is hoped that specific recommendations put forward in this paper will facilitate the policy formulation process for the welfare of the disabled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to guarantee a quality life and equal opportunity for people with special needs in Oman, the following issues should be taken into consideration:

- Nationwide statistics about the number and types (and sub-types) of disabilities should be available by gender, age, and region, because the available list is not comprehensive and there are additional types of disabilities.
- Arrangements for capacity building of Omani professionals who are trained in counseling, training, and teaching people with special needs should be made.
- the awareness should be enhanced that with the current technologies anything can be achieved and the disabled can join the workforce and become effective workers as long as resources and proper training is provided
- Infrastructure necessary to cater for people with special needs in Oman should be developed by raising awareness about the opportunities that ICT can provide to empower the disabled.
- Involve and encourage the local businesses to invest in CBR due to the limited number of these centers, currently 22, which are managing a big number of children with disabilities with limited resources (Ministry of National Economy, 2008).
- Local businesses should utilize technology in order to expand their services to people with special needs.
- Utilize computing technology for tasks such as reading and writing documents, communicating with others, and searching for information on the Internet. People with disabilities are capable of handling a wide range of activities independently.
- By accessing government's e-services from home, it makes life of the disabled easy, especially if they find it difficult to go out of their homes. It also makes pursuing higher education via e-learning possible, if attending university/college is physically difficult.

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