

My Work with Pakistani Employers for the Job Placement of Persons with Disabilities:

An Autoethnographic Journey

by

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### **Abstract**

For eight years, I was associated with a disability inclusion initiative called the Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities, Pakistan (NOWPDP). It specializes in skills training of persons with disabilities and making workplaces disability confident. The purpose of this autoethnography is to explore my journey in developing and utilizing effective approaches at NOWPDP to persuade Pakistani employers to hire persons with disabilities.

In its programmatic activities, NOWPDP embraced the social model of disability, defined by Michael Oliver, viewing disability as a social construct. The concept of intersectionality has been applied to understand how different social locations play a major role in experiencing privilege and discrimination. In our journey to provide job placement opportunities to people with disabilities, we faced barriers like inaccessible public infrastructure, preconceived negative notions about people with disabilities, overprotection from family members, and a feeling of hopelessness from the system experienced by individuals in the disability community.

Despite challenges in job placements, we applied various innovative strategies, employing a carrot-and-stick approach, to persuade employers to hire individuals with disabilities. Social cognitive theory has also been applied to understand how employers adopt the practice of hiring people with disabilities by observing other employers and assessing the consequences of their actions. Some of these strategies included creating success stories and case studies. We did this by specifically targeting industry leaders, which had a trickle-down effect in persuading other industry players.

While studying the successful strategies, I have also analyzed the structure of NOWPDP, which had a board with influential leaders but did not have the representation of persons with disabilities. This brings us to the notion of inclusive governance which goes beyond the concept of inclusion and aims towards inclusive decision-making. To better understand how people with disabilities are perceived in society, I have also applied the stereotype content model that helps us understand how we perceive a social group based on the dimensions of warmth and competence. The impact of colonization had a pivotal impact on how employers judged the competence of employees like the ability to speak fluent English. The concept of power, as defined by Foucault as ubiquitous, had a significant impact on our understanding of inclusion and on our interactions with individuals with disabilities.

We initiated a specialized vocational training program through our research with the British Council Pakistan that enabled us to know the top trades that have the highest possibility of job placements for persons with disabilities. We utilized public relations to highlight our partnership with the companies to push other organizations to come on board. We also organized campaigns like 100 Days, 100 Lives, which connected 100 persons with disabilities with 100 industry professionals to create job opportunities within 100 days.

We encouraged government institutions to legally compel organizations to hire people with disabilities and highlighted us as a possible partner to help them with this journey. Our partnership with the State Bank of Pakistan was one of our biggest successes. It helped us draft a banking policy and convince banking institutions to lay out

a three-year-long plan to make their organizations accessible for customers and employees with disabilities, allowing us to open doors to job placement for people with disabilities.

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Most importantly, I am grateful to all the organizations whose stories I have shared, which will give readers a context to the lives, struggles, and successes of people with disabilities in Pakistan. I am also thankful to the University of Manitoba for providing access to important research material required for me to understand the subject and better communicate the ideas presented in this autoethnography.

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## Introduction

I share a deep bond with my nephew who was born in 2001 with a rare birth condition called Spina Bifida, which resulted in him having a physical disability. With limited interaction with individuals with disabilities in our lives and little hope for government support, the entire family felt anxious about what would happen as he grew older. The initial years were filled with constant visits to doctors, hoping to hear about a possible medical cure that would allow him to walk on his own. After years of running around different hospitals in Karachi, we came to the realization that there is no cure, even in the global north, for this condition. This realization prompted us to search for opportunities for his education and skill development. Despite the abundance of schools in the city, we never imagined that gaining admission into an educational institution would be such a struggle. Sometimes it was due to physical accessibility issues, and other times the administration simply showed no interest in accommodating individuals with physical disabilities, claiming a lack of expertise or facilities.

He and his family are not alone in this journey, in fact, according to WHO, the population of people with disabilities in the world is around one billion (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). With limited educational, social, and economic opportunities, a large segment of this population remains in the vicious cycle of poverty (Yeo, 2005). These limitations are aggravated when it comes to people with disabilities living in the global South. My closeness with my nephew introduced me to various organizations that worked for people with disabilities. Some organizations focused on rehabilitation, while

others dealt with recreation, and still others centered on special education. Although, I had no idea about the models of disability such as the medical, charitable, social, or rights-based, but inheritably I was tilted toward the social model. According to Michael Oliver (2009),

“Hence disability, according to the social model, is all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people; ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination, from inaccessible public buildings to unusable transport systems, from segregated education to excluding work arrangements, and so on.” (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009, p.21)

The medical model sees a person with a disability from their health condition and focuses on their treatment. The charitable model sees a person with a disability from a sympathetic lens and believes that they need support and charity. The social model sees disability because of the barriers a person faces in society, while the rights-based model emphasizes ensuring the human rights of a person with disability (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). This inclination towards the social model of disability occurred because I wanted my nephew to be seen and treated like everyone else. While I was not aware of these terminologies, my natural inclination introduced me to the Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities, Pakistan – commonly known as NOWPDP. It worked for the education and job placement of people with disabilities. My association with NOWPDP enabled me to understand the barriers faced by people with disabilities and apply innovative strategies that helped us ease these impediments.

The purpose of this autoethnography is to explore my journey in developing and utilizing the effective approaches utilized at NOWPDP to persuade Pakistani employers to hire persons with disabilities. According to the British Council (2014), the exclusion of people with disabilities from the economic sphere costs Pakistan 4.9% to 6.3% of the GDP. With approximately 27 million people with disabilities (British Council, 2014), economic exclusion remains one of the biggest challenges for people with disabilities in Pakistan.

While we embraced the social model of disability, like many critics of the social models we also sometimes relied on individual models of disabilities. The major critique of the social model of disability is that it completely puts the onus on society and misses things like medication, pain, or ill health (Humphrey, 1994). Michael Oliver divides the disability models into two broad categories that include individual model and the social model (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). Individual models include all approaches like medical, charity and more that take inspiration from personal tragedy theory which elucidates disability because of a person's impairments rather than social oppression theory which describes disability because of a social problem.

There is a major scarcity of data relating to people with disabilities in Pakistan. The challenge around the lack of data and research can be understood with the comparison of census figures of 1998 and 2017 that counted the number of people with disabilities in Pakistan. According to the 1998 census, the population of people with disabilities was 2.34% (Rathore, New & Iftikhar, 2011), while this figure became 0.48% (Bari & Kamran, 2019) in the latest 2017 census. This decline in the numbers is because

there was no data field for disabilities in the 2017 census. It was only added after a court ruling in between this countrywide census drive. My association allowed me to understand how data impacts the social and economic deprivation of persons with disabilities. It is like a CEO creating the budget of a company without knowing how many people they employ – it is a recipe for disaster.

The organization where I worked is a disability inclusion initiative that has worked in the areas of education and economic empowerment since 2008. It started as a Golden Jubilee Initiative of the Aga Khan IV for the capacity building of disability organizations across Pakistan. It was the result of comprehensive research conducted by the Aga Khan National Council titled, “Journey of Hope” which recognized a need for a national entity for bringing different disability organizations working in silos to a national platform. Faced with multiple challenges in the initial phase, which I have discussed in detail in this autoethnography, it gradually moved to two major programs; one is for education and the other one is for economic empowerment. The major focus of this autoethnography will be on the second initiative which has two major programs. Program number one is called Yaqeen, and the second program is called the Rickshaw Project. Yaqeen, which means “Certainty” in the Urdu language, helps workplaces become disability confident through a) infrastructure accessibility, b) employee sensitization, c) job mapping, and d) placement of people with disabilities.

The second program, the Rickshaw Project, provides hand-controlled rickshaws in installments for the self-employment of people with disabilities. I joined the organization in 2014 in the role of Project Officer for the Rickshaw Project, where I was

responsible for running the operations and expanding the project. When I left the organization in January 2022, I was the External Engagement Manager, taking care of the marketing, fundraising, and advocacy for the organization. In January 2022 I started my master's in disability studies at the University of Manitoba. Although I have been in the field of disability for a long time, I have always wanted to equip myself in this field academically.

With almost eight years of association with a nonprofit organization, I had the chance to interact with a myriad of employers undertaking our disability consulting program. This program assisted organizations in becoming disability confident so that they can hire persons with disabilities in their workplace. Through this autoethnography, I aim to unpack numerous strategies that helped us in the job placement of around 300+ people with disabilities each year and the signing up of many organizations for our disabilities consulting program.

### **Purpose and Implication**

My first interaction with a disabled person was at my Montessori school. A boy joined our class after we had already completed three months of studies. Before that, I had never seen any person with a disability. I was asked to sit next to him on his first day. My initial reaction was a feeling of fear because when we were children, we heard stories about people having different body structures and their association with being something bad in nature. I have vivid memories of my interaction with him. He was excellent at his studies, and we bonded well later. After a few weeks, I never saw him in our class, and we heard from our teacher that he would not be able to join the school.

Although Pakistan has a large population of people with disabilities, you rarely see disabled people in educational institutes, workplaces, or recreational spaces. When I was in my seventh standard, my sister gave birth to my nephew, who had a physical disability. A rare condition that impacts the growth of the spinal cord during birth. This affects mobility and control over the bowel and bladder. My nephew was the second person whom I knew who had a disability. I can recall when he was born, everyone in the family was confused and anxious. This felt like my first day of meeting him again because the only thing we kept hearing from doctors was about the things he would not be able to do like a non-disabled person.

I remember the nervous faces of my sister and mother discussing how he would be able to live his life when they were no longer around. Every day, they would meet and discuss how he would be able to go to school, be able to play like every other child and

earn a living. With limited support from the government and negligible element of accessibility in public infrastructure, a lot of their concerns were genuine. For context, a family with one person with a disability can receive a mere amount of Rs. 30,000 (around 140 CAD) annual support through Pakistan Bait-ul-Maal ([www.ahsaasprogram.pk](http://www.ahsaasprogram.pk)). As my nephew grew older, everyone was concerned that they could do everything for him now but what would happen to him after they were no more? The biggest reason behind this fear was that nobody in our family imagined that a person with a disability could have a job like anyone else because we had never seen that.

I did my studies in business administration in Pakistan and started doing corporate jobs initially, but I was fortunate enough to be part of a non-profit organization and got to know the disabled community. For an average Pakistani person like me who rarely saw a person with a disability working in any workplace, it was quite shocking to meet wheelchair users who moved around in rickshaws and meet my manager who had a visual disability and worked like anyone else. This might be a common sight in many cultures and countries, but it is quite uncommon to see people with disabilities working like anyone else. Every day I meet people and share these stories with my nephew, sister, and mother. It was the best feeling to see them with blooming hope because, like me, they have been gaslighted by people around us to believe that people with disabilities can only live like sick patients without the possibility of contributing anything to society.

When I became part of the organization in 2014, we initiated our disability consulting program for one of the biggest conglomerates in Pakistan, a local business with progressive leadership that competed with multinationals operating in Pakistan. For

our first engagement, we reached out to organizations that we sensed were: involved in numerous diversity and inclusion activities, won CSR awards, and were easy to reach out to due to common connection with our board members. This organization agreed to a multi-year project where we were tasked to help them with a) conducting accessibility audits and recommending changes, b) improving their diversity and inclusion policy framework, c) master training of the HR department and disability sensitization of staff, and d) job mapping and placement of people with disabilities. Before this program, we had a job matching program where we connected employers with people with disabilities. This program was not very successful and the reasoning for it will be discussed in detail later in this autoethnography. To formulate this new disability consulting program, we used our past learnings from the job matching program, did research on the region and best practices around the world, and developed it based on our expertise and market needs.

The idea of the project was rooted in the concept of self-sufficiency by preparing them in such a way that they do not need us in the future. This initiative evolved from our direct placement program where we acted like an employment agency for disabled. We reached out to corporate entities to hire people with disabilities from our data bank. This strategy gave us decent results in the short run because a myriad of entities hire people with disabilities as part of their marketing initiatives. Within a few months of placement, we would see a large segment of these individuals being fired or leaving their workplaces on their own. The key factors behind these incidents was that these

organizations were not ready. The infrastructure was largely inaccessible, and the staff had little or no experience of accommodating people with disabilities.

After we did our first disability consulting project, we managed to convince Pakistan's biggest bank to join this initiative. Our first engagement with the business conglomerate I shared above played a major role in convincing this bank to come on board. We got the chance to implement the project on 30 branches across Pakistan. These projects were unique because, unlike a not-for-profit organization, we charged a decent consulting fee that supported many of our initiatives. Working on developing these projects required us to study the successful models of the global North and giving it a Pakistani touch to it, so it would not be difficult for employers to accept. For example, when we suggested accessibility changes, sometimes it was not possible to implement universal accessibility standards. At times office buildings were designed such that there was little room for building accessibility features like ramps. Instead of recommending a standard 12:1 ramp, we recommended a 1:6 ramp as an option. Instead of the standard tactile walking surfaces that were expensive to procure, we would sometimes recommend anti-slip coating so there is at least something to guide a person with a visual disability.

In 2014, we had only one client onboard with around 26 job placements that year. The figure increased to a total of 2000+ placements and 100+ clients by 2021.

There is a lot of literature available on how to make a better environment for disabled people in the workplace. However, there is limited information available on how to convince business entities to hire more people with disabilities. This question might not be relevant for developed countries because there are anti-discrimination laws, and

the infrastructure is generally accessible. Yet, for developing countries like Pakistan, this information is pertinent. This is significant because there are neither incentives nor penalties for entities to hire disabled people.

Penalties and incentives exist, but they are hardly ever implemented. The Sindh Empowerment of People with Disabilities Act 2018, the law stipulates that organizations will be penalized if they do not maintain a 5% quota, but government entities are usually non-compliant. (Express Tribune, 2022). The law also promises tax benefits to organizations but there are no clear advantages available on the ground. So, there is neither an incentive to encourage employment nor enforcement to penalize non-compliance. In this situation convincing an organization is a difficult thing to do and we as an organization did that quite convincingly. We used the carrot and- stick- approach due to limited government enforcement. It is vital to share this story so more people with disabilities can be hired not only in Pakistan but in other countries with similar cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes.

To undertake this autoethnography for the exploration of effective approaches we utilized at the Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities, Pakistan (NOWPDP) to persuade Pakistani employers to embrace hiring of persons with disabilities, I focus on these research questions:

- 1) What barriers did we face in the job placement of people with disabilities?
- 2) What were the underlying causes I believed were behind the barriers we encountered?
- 3) What innovative strategies did we use that resulted in successful job placements?

### **Literature Review**

This section will help us highlight the significant scholarly work that has been developed around inclusive hiring practices used by companies. It will also analyze the factors that motivate the employer to build a disability-confident culture. Examining the literature will help us understand the current state of the job market for persons with disabilities and what motivates and demotivates them in hiring people with disabilities. When it comes to laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities, Pakistan was way ahead of its time even if we compare it with developed countries like Canada and the United States. Pakistan introduced its Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance in 1981 (Ahmed, Khan & Nasem, 2011), which was also declared as a Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) by the General Assembly of the United Nations where a major focus was around rehabilitation, opportunities equalization, rehabilitation, and prevention of disabilities. While the law covers a wide array of areas, the major highlight was its 2% quota allocation in government and private entities for people with disabilities (Government of Pakistan, 1981).

The 18<sup>th</sup> amendment in the Constitution of Pakistan in 2010 gave greater self-governing autonomy to the provinces (Musarrat, Ali & Azhar, 2012), which enabled all of them to make their provincial disability laws later. Currently, the province of Sindh has a 5% quota (Sindh Government, 2018), Punjab has a 3% quota (Dawn News, 2021), Baluchistan has a 5% quota (Baluchistan Government, 2017), and KPK has a 2% quota (Arsh, 2019) for job placement of people with disabilities in government and private

entities. These laws have been in place for a long time, but they had little impact on the ground due to limited enforcement mechanisms or benefits. To understand whether these numbers are being fulfilled or not, a group of researchers (Ash et.al, 2019) from the province KPK advocated getting employees' data from 12 government departments. Through a team of volunteers from another (a not-for-profit organization), the data was divided between employees with and without disabilities. Data sets were analyzed and compared with the 2% government-mandated quota.

Out of 171,137 government employees in 12 departments, only 1151 were people with disabilities, which is only 0.673%. The government department with the highest number of people with disabilities was Higher Education Archives and Libraries with 1.646% of people with disabilities (Ash et.al, 2019). The researchers have highlighted that the major challenge is associated with the lack of an implementation mechanism for penalizing employers who do not hire people with disabilities. Although the law highlights penalizing employers who do not hire people with disabilities by paying an equal amount they would have paid to an employee with disabilities, as a penalty. This law could be effective in promoting inclusion, but due to non-implementation, it has become ineffective. As the statistics regarding whether the quota is being fulfilled are not transparent, it has been difficult to pressure the government to do its constitutional duties.

In another scenario, mixed-method research to understand employers' hiring intentions in recruiting qualified people with disabilities was conducted. Initially, a survey was conducted among the HR representatives of a Business Advisory Council (Fraser et. al, 2010). This was conducted to gather preliminary ideas about the factors

that play a role in encouraging or discouraging employers from recruiting people with disabilities. Once these responses were collected, three semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted among employers from small, mid, and large enterprises. According to the result of the research, there are eight major factors that impact employers' hiring intentions.

The first positive factor is the loyalty and commitment of people with disabilities to an employer. Fraser et. Al (2010) quoted a comment from an employer, "He was very loyal and worked in kitchen support for me over 11 years. You know they'd show up and not call to say 'I don't feel too well today. This commitment to the company appeared to be very much appreciated." The second factor was the inaccessibility of vocational rehabilitation agencies. Employers mentioned their unawareness of the agencies and those who knew about them recommended that they should have an accessible database of job-ready candidates for hire.

The third factor is the fear of losing revenue. Employers believe that an employee with a disability will take more time to deal with work or there might be other human resources that they will have to link with that person. Based on my experience of interaction with many employers, many had this preconceived notion that if they are hiring a person with disability, they might have to assign a buddy that can take care of that person's needs as the workplace does not have the right accessible working environment. The fourth factor was the fear of litigation due to anything that goes wrong once a person with a disability is a part of the workforce. The fifth factor was around incentives. If there was some sort of government benefit in terms of a tax break or

allowance, it could motivate employers to have more people with disabilities in the workforce. The sixth barrier was their limited resources to deal with the physical impediments that may hinder a person with a disability in the workplace.

Hemphill & Kulik (2016) conducted qualitative research in South Australia, and they analyzed categories of employers who are more open to hiring people with disabilities. After the interviews, the researchers divided employers into two categories that include hirers and non-hirers. Hirers are those companies that have people with disabilities in their workplace and non-hirers are organizations which do not. The hirers were further divided into two sub-categories including the loyal and light hirers. Loyal hirers are those who already have a system in place to create opportunities for disabled people. They already follow a policy based on equity that welcomes everyone. Although they hire people with disabilities, they are at a saturation point with few opportunities for employment agencies to create jobs in large numbers.

The second category of employers is light employers. These employers have a positive experience hiring people with disabilities, but the number of opportunities created is not significant. There may be barriers in the process and during employment, but employers are open to recommendations and changes. According to the researchers, this category of employers should be the focus of employment agencies to achieve impactful results. The third category of a workplace is those who are non-hirers. These are organizations that have no or little experience in hiring disabled people. These organizations usually have concerns and misconceptions about people with disabilities.

Employers in this category have a long route to inclusive and there is a need to educate them to address their misconceptions.

Swarup (2021) conducted a case study analysis among international companies operating in India. The researcher divided these international companies into two categories. The first category is of companies that heavily rely on their global mandate for disability inclusion is based on the policy of non-discrimination. The second category consists of companies that have a strong international mandate but modify their strategy based on the local market context. For example, Unilever Pakistan recently initiated a unique one-year-long trainee program by hiring a batch of people with disabilities to enhance their skill level (Unilever PLC, 2023). The first set of companies is called globals and the second set is called glocals.

According to research by UNESCO (2018, p.3), “persons with disabilities are nearly always worse off than persons without disabilities: on average, the former are less likely to ever attend school, they are more likely to be out of school, they are less likely to complete primary or secondary education, they have fewer years of schooling, and they are less likely to possess basic literacy skills.” As a result, companies may struggle to find the right resources for the skills required at the workplace. Swarup (2021) mentions the strategy used by glocals who have an international mandate but tweak their strategy based on market reality such as lack of limited education. These companies keep all job roles open for everyone including people with disabilities but take certain proactive measures to increase the number of people with disabilities in certain areas. They do it by identifying roles and matching them with a certain kind of disability.

Swarup (2021) mentions the example of Lemon Tree Hotels, which had a workforce of around 20% of people with disabilities. They managed to bring these numbers to this stage after analyzing that a lot of front desk and administrative jobs can be easily done by people with physical disabilities. It also quotes the example of other companies (Swarup, 2021, p. 326), “This has involved, as a first step, identifying roles and opportunities which can be performed well by PwDs. Examples here include call centre roles which can be done by PwDs who locomotor are disabled.”

The research serves as a template for stakeholders working in developing countries where people with disabilities have limited educational opportunities. If the policy of “equal opportunity employment” is implemented in a developing country like any developed country, it will be extremely difficult for people with disabilities to be part of the workforce (Swarup, 2021).

### **Theoretical Approach**

I am approaching this research from the perspective of a rights-based model of disability. The rights-based model of disability identifies disability as a social construct inspired by the social model of disability. According to this concept, disability is a result of the interaction between a person's impairment and the physical barriers present in society (CBM International, n.d). So, if a person with a physical disability is unable to access education or employment due to inaccessible infrastructure, it is the society that needs to change. Every person has equal rights, and they should have equal opportunities without any discrimination. This idea focuses on creating a system where everyone has equitable chances to succeed. On the contrary, there are other models of disability, such as the charity model and the medical model (Vanhala, 2010).

Equality in this autoethnography, is based on a contextual, effects-based approach. It takes into consideration the consequences, context, and real-world effects of legal decisions or rules. It evolved from the first case, *Andrews v. Law Society of British Columbia* (1989), which appeared after the development of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). It does not treat equality from a literal point of view because equality without understanding the context can result in inequality. For example, the notion of equality may suggest that all students should be given equal time for their examination, but it will create an unequal context for people with learning disabilities. For this situation to be truly equal, students who with learning disabilities should be given extra time.

All other models of disability can be grouped into individual models of disability as it puts the onus of a person's disability on their impairment (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009). A prominent model of disability is known as the medical model, which sees a person from a medical perspective. Instead of addressing the needs of a person with a disability in society, this model tries to correct the person (Hogan, 2019). The responsibility for participation in society, obtaining education, and finding employment is placed solely on the person with disabilities. This model views a person through the lens of their existing health condition that needs to be cured or fixed. Although various international bodies like the United Nations and people with disabilities advocate for social and rights-based models of disability, the medical model of disability is still the most prominent, specifically in the global (South Rao, & Kalyanpur, 2014).

The charity model of disability sees a person with a disability as an object of pity. Rather than working to create equitable opportunities in society, proponents of this model consider people with disabilities as passive recipients of services. The idea here is to identify what is good for these vulnerable people and arrange services based on it.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Method**

To explore the strategies that helped me and my colleagues at NOWPDP in convincing Pakistani employers to hire people with disabilities, I conducted an autoethnography. Autoethnography which emerged from ethnography is a genre of academic writing that analyzes the lived experience of the author and connects these insights with cultural rules and resources, self-identity, communication practices, symbols, traditions, premises, emotions, shared meanings, and larger cultural, social, and political issues (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography has its Greek roots where *autós* means “self”, *ethnos* means “people”, and *graphia* means “writing” (Poulos, 2021).

The author’s insights and experiences play a vital role in understanding a phenomenon. Autoethnography practitioners write about themselves in cultural and social contexts to highlight the contours of human cultural-social life (Hesse & Leavy, 2006). Like the writers of memoirs, autobiographies, and creative non-fiction, autoethnography writers go through a process of discovery via writing. This means that writing itself is a process, which is unlike other research methods where it’s a completion task done after the research is conducted (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2014). Unlike conventional research, no ethics committee approval is required because the subject being studied is the person who conducts the research. Anecdotal references to other people are made, but the confidentiality of the process and person is observed.

According to Ellis et.al., (2011) autoethnography is a research writing approach that aims to systematically analyze and explain personal experience for comprehending a cultural experience. To write an autoethnography, the author is not usually required to live through an experience to write about it in a published work, but they accumulate these experiences by using hindsight (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989, Freeman, 2004). The author can interview people to recall the memories and can also get assistance from recordings, photographs, and journals (Delany, 2004; Didion, 2005; Goodall, 2006; Herrmann, 2005).

Most authors, while writing autoethnography rely on epiphanies which are vital moments that have an impact on a person's life (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989). At times they also rely on a bad memory or crisis that pushes a person to reflect on a lived experience (Zaner, 2004). Autoethnography should have the ability to engage readers and must be evocative and aesthetic. It should use the notion of storytelling that includes a scene, characters, and plot development (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000), The story should also have a chronological order for the ease of the reader (Didion, 2005; Frank, 1995).

### **Data Collection**

To write this autoethnography, I have primarily relied on personal journals, personal interviews, and artifacts such as social media, pictures, reports, and news articles. Due to my long association with NOWPDP, it was a challenge to remember not only the success stories but also the events that happened in the recent past. I

wanted the narrative to be written in chronological order to understand why we initiated a certain program, what challenges we faced, what successes we achieved, what changes we made, and what impact it created.

Due to my extensive association with the organization and the underlying challenges mentioned above, I sought assistance from various forms of artifacts to help me recall major events. The social media postings of NOWPDP were very helpful. The social media postings were of immense assistance, given our long-time activity on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. We were particularly active on Facebook even before I joined the organization/ Scrolling through the timeline alerted me about various events that occurred. These social media postings included our success stories, random fun stories of the employees, impact numbers, news articles, and events. In my personal journals, I first documented all the major events in chronological order and then built a timeline of our interventions. Going through the timeline not only allowed me to understand the historical facts but also immersed me in a nostalgic journey as I could see our old pictures, videos, and news clippings.

Google News offered a great medium to skim major news sites based on certain keywords. I also picked up these news articles from the internet in sequential order to understand how our work was perceived and understood by someone not associated with our organization. While social media postings are narrated in a storytelling manner, which may lack important details, I also studied several programmatic reports available online on NOWPDP's website. NOWPDP create reports for our donors, reflecting how the programs achieved the goals set initially and the challenges faced in

conducting vital activities. This gave me better insight into understanding the successes and challenges. After compiling my personal journals and artifacts, I conducted a personal interview of myself. The concept of reflexivity assisted me a lot in understanding my own biases and approaching the research topic from a neutral perspective.

### **Data Analysis**

Following the compilation of my personal journals, artifacts, and personal interviews, I coded the information in multiple thematic areas. During the data analysis process, I also conducted cultural analysis to understand how people with disabilities are perceived differently in various societies. I needed to reflect and communicate how we convinced Pakistani employers to hire people with disabilities. Different models of disabilities, such as the medical, charity, social, and rights-based models, play a critical role here. The corporate culture in Pakistan and the impact of government regulations are unique, and I needed to understand these influences in my autoethnography so that people utilizing this research in their work can understand them before implementing it in their cultural context. As autoethnography is more dependent on how a researcher understands a research question, there is a possibility that it can be plagued by personal biases and important details being missed. As a result, I have used the triangulation method by utilizing my personal journal and complementing it through artifacts like social media postings and news articles. This triangulation method has helped me to be as objective as possible in understanding the research questions. Reflexivity was used

at every step to understand my personal biases and positionality. This step was critical for me because I have been a part of this organization for over eight years and have been involved in most of the programmatic activities that I have highlighted. I was also the person who ran the marketing and communication efforts, which made me craft our messaging for external audiences. This association may pose a risk of me having a personal bias and not being able to critically analyze the impact.

After the process of data collection and analysis, I have gone through the process of narrative construction so that the entire journey can be expressed in an autoethnographic style. I have also tried to be less dependent on difficult research jargon because I want this autobiography to have a real impact on organizations in developing countries. I am highlighting this because I had little knowledge about these topics. I was starting my journey at this disability organization; it was difficult for me to decode research relying on difficult terminology.

### **Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality**

Through this autoethnography, I have shared my personal experience of working as a team member of NOWPDP interacting with several government officials, people working in the corporate world, and people with disabilities. This narration revolves around the back story of how we managed to get clients on board when neither an incentive was offered, nor a penalty was enforced by the government. This highlights how we managed to create intrinsic incentives for employers through public relations, which refers to developing and maintaining a favourable public image as per

the Oxford English Dictionary (2022). It also emphasizes how we managed to create social pressure through advocacy.

With my extensive eight-year involvement at a non-profit organization participating in the proposal, execution, and promotion of these projects, I may hold specific viewpoints or biases regarding their achievements and shortcomings. To tackle these obstacles and uphold a mindful stance regarding my own biases, I have integrated reflexivity into my research by consistently maintaining reflective journals. These journals served to develop a heightened self-awareness of my positionality and privilege.

### **Ethical Consideration**

As this is autoethnography, no person was interviewed or studied during the study. The entire process reflects on my experience and is portrayed through stories. Although the stories and lived experiences of many people with disabilities whom I met during the journey are shared, pseudonyms are given to conceal their identities. Some of these experiences were directly shared with me because I have personally interacted with them, and some incidences were shared with me through various studies we conducted across Pakistan.

Apart from NOWPDP, no organization or person was approached for consent, because of which I have maintained anonymity in this entire autoethnography about people and organizations. According to Pensoneau et al. (2017), there are two major ethical concerns in doing autoethnography. First is the researcher's relationship with the

community in which they are doing research, and the second is their interpersonal relationship within the community. While ensuring the confidentiality of the participants from outside the community is comparatively easier, ensuring the anonymity of the participants within the community is a bit challenging. According to Pensoneau et al. (2017), if a researcher wants to continue their research in the subject area, they should ensure confidentiality, so they don't compromise their relationship, which is extremely important for going back to the community and exploring more in the subject area. To take care of these real challenges, they have devised a two-pronged strategy. The first component of this strategy is to collapse the characters of the subjects, so their experiences, likeness, and actions are indistinguishable. The second component of the strategy is to use fictionalization and pseudonyms, which is an important element of storytelling so that the experiences of participants can be disguised.

Before initiating this autoethnography, I thought using pseudonyms would be enough to ensure anonymity. Going through this research enabled me to understand that anonymity can be easier to ensure outside of the disability community. However, certain characteristics and storylines may be enough to recognize those particular people by the members of the same community. I have also used the examples of many employers with whom we have worked. While I have left NOWPDP, these employers continue to have their relationship with my NOWPDP. I do not want any points mentioned in this research to compromise the ability of NOWPDP to engage with these institutions in the future. So not only have used pseudonyms for a few institutions, but I

have also, at times, tweaked the characteristics so that they become only a source of learning and not a source of pointing fingers at each other.

I have used the concept of reflexivity throughout my research to ensure that my personal biases do not impact the research questions I want to explore. Due to my long association with this organization and my involvement in many of these projects, there is a high chance that I might see the successful components of the projects more. Still, I want to be as objective as possible. Therefore, at every step, I have critically analyzed my thoughts before moving on to analyze various aspects of these events. I have clarified my positionality in this context.

As explained earlier, the entire reason for writing this autobiography is to be a source of guidance to people working in developing countries for the job placements of people with disabilities. While it may have examples of events that may be treated as criticism, the intention is solely for learning purposes as people working in this sector can relate to real-life examples, so real-life solutions can be derived.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

The first challenge I faced was subjectivity. Having been associated with NOWPDP for over eight years and being involved in proposing, implementing, and promoting the discussed projects, I might have certain opinions about their success and failures. Success and failure can be relative terms and what may be a successful project for me may not be viewed the same way by others reading this autobiography. Similarly,

failures for me may not be perceived as failures by others. Additionally, there is no guarantee that implementing these projects exactly as we did will yield the same results. There is also a risk of generalization, as the disability community is diverse, comprising individuals with various identities. Sometimes, the projects we implemented may have inadvertently treated different types of disabilities as homogeneous groups with similar characteristics, which is not accurate in real life. To address these challenges and remain aware of my biases, I have incorporated the concept of reflexivity by maintaining reflective journals throughout this research. These journals helped me cultivate self-awareness of my positionality and privilege.

### **About Myself**

I come from a Pakistani middle-class family. When I was a child, my dreams were also like the conditions that I have faced around me. I only dreamed about completing my school, getting into a good college, graduating with some degree, and getting into a job where I could sustain an average life. We were not ever very poor or rich at any point in our life. When I was a child, we were never very strict about rules, but stereotypical ideas persisted around us. I lived in a community living center where we had around 800 houses in the same community, and our world revolved around them when talked about religious, cultural, educational, and economic opportunities.

My cultural and religious identity has played a major role in shaping my worldview. I am an Ismaili Muslim, which is a minority Muslim sect that follows the

Aga Khan IV. Muslims are generally divided into two major branches: the majority Sunni and the minority Shia. Ismailis are a minority sect under Shia Islam. My religious identity has played a major role in developing what I am today. Being part of a minority close-knit religious group helped me at many points in life, but it also posed challenges. Since we were close-knit, major conservative influences had little impact on us when it came to the education of girls and the rights of the underprivileged. Since I was a child, I have heard a common belief among the people in our community that if a family has a choice between educating a girl or a boy and can only afford the education for one, it is preferred to get the girl educated. This common belief and practice had a major positive impact on my life.

The Ismaili community today live mainly in 25 different countries (The Ismaili, 2022) and are organized under the leadership of Councils based on different geographic jurisdiction. Each jurisdiction has various social upliftment programs including an arm for people with disabilities. While these councils are responsible for making lives better for people with disabilities, the way it runs is mostly people-dependent without uniform programs across different regions. A strong sense of volunteering drives these programs, and it is ingrained heavily in charitable initiatives (The Ismaili, 2020). Based on the interaction of my nephew with these institutions in the community, I sense that the major inspiration is on the charitable model of disability, with a slow evolution towards the social model.

When I was a child, I had no dreams and wanted to live an average life. A small incident in my school changed my belief about what I thought about myself and that I

have control over my destiny and my dreams. When my teacher in grade seven received a complaint from another teacher about me, that I was not doing well in my studies and was not disciplined enough in the classroom; that English teacher called me one day from my classroom. Initially, I was very stressed because I thought that this was going to be a usual day where the teacher would lecture me about how bad I was and recall my mistakes. Surprisingly, that teacher took me outside, gave me lots of water, shook my hand, and asked me if I was okay. She politely highlighted the complaint, but she did it in a tone that surprised me. Instead of complaining, she showed her concern and volunteered to assist if I needed anything.

She gave me some guidance on things that I could apply in my life to improve, and she just chatted with me for a few minutes about my family and myself. She shared her story and her own experiences. She also asked me about my hobbies, what I would like to do when I am free, and what I want to do in the future, according to my interests. This was my first encounter with anyone in my life who was not just lecturing me about the things I needed to improve, but who was genuinely interested in me and wanted to get to know me as a person. Although this encounter might seem minuscule to someone, this short meeting had a major impact on my life. It made me feel a little more important and made me believe that I had control over things about myself in the future.

Surprisingly, this happened at the same time when my nephew was one or two years old and was ready to go to daycare. Although it did not transform me into an entirely new person who could see people with disabilities differently, I could sense that how we were

dealing with this overall situation, and there could be things that could change for the better.

**About Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities, Pakistan**

Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities, Pakistan (NOWPDP) was initiated in 2008 as a network of organizations working for people with disabilities in Pakistan. This organization was created because of the Golden Jubilee initiative of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan. During the Golden Jubilee activities, a report called "The Journey of Hope" was presented, which mentioned the conditions of people with disabilities in Pakistan. One of the major insights from that report was the notion that many disability organizations were functioning in Pakistan, but they were working in isolation, unable to collaborate effectively. This lack of collaboration resulted in missed opportunities to make a significant impact. As a response to this, NOWPDP was formed.

Initially the network started its operations with almost 100 organizations as members, NOWPDP faced various challenges, with a major one being funding. Many of the members expected NOWPDP to provide the necessary financial resources to support their operations and create an impact. Another significant challenge was demonstrating the organization's impact on potential funders. When working in areas such as research, capacity building, or advocacy, showing tangible results in the lives of beneficiaries can take years, making it difficult to measure and present progress.

I have seen that when seeking donations from the corporate sector, they often prefer programs that can be prominently displayed in their CSR reports. This preference for short-term, visible impact creates a challenge for organizations like NOWPDP, which

focuses on long-term and systemic change. While NOWPDP initially operated as a network for capacity building, it eventually transitioned to programmatic activities like a typical not-for-profit organization. In my experience working with NOWPDP and observing other not-for-profit organizations operating in Pakistan, the primary source of financial resources is corporate and personal donations. This reliance on donations, as opposed to consistent government support, raises sustainability concerns. Many organizations are compelled to adjust their mandates to align with the interests of donors, rather than staying true to their original missions. Ideally, all not-for-profits should collaborate to maximize their impact on the lives of people with disabilities. However, due to limited funding sources, many organizations end up competing instead of working together.

The people working at NOWPDP include both people with and without disabilities and around 20% identified as disabled. NOWPDP's board of directors mainly consists of individuals with backgrounds in business rather than core expertise in the field of disability. NOWPDP's core mission is to create economic opportunities for people with disabilities, requiring strong connections in the business community to create employment and self-employment opportunities. Board members with business backgrounds, the President of NOWPDP, and the Vice President, have extensive networks and financial resources. Both individuals are from one of the leading business families in Pakistan and they are among the highest taxpayers in the country (Khan, 2014). They have been instrumental in connecting NOWPDP to industry leaders and government officials, as well as providing financial support through personal donations

and contributions from the business community. Although there were a few individuals on the board who worked in the disability sector, there was no representation of people with disabilities themselves on the board.

While having board members from business backgrounds is significant for achieving organizational sustainability but I personally feel that there should be a sizeable representation of persons with disabilities in the board because the best ideas come from people who have experience the challenges. This brings us to the concept of inclusive leadership. The concept of inclusive governance goes beyond the concept of inclusion and aims towards inclusive decision-making (Brown, 2002). This means that people with disabilities are not only part of the organization, but they should be part of the organization in a leadership position so they can make decisions for themselves. Although our organization had a decent percentage of people with disabilities, there were no disabled people on the board.

The logic of having industrialists on the board to help us raise funds and connect us to employers, I believe there should have been at least a few people with disabilities who were part of the board. No matter how positive your intent is, the non-inclusion of the people you are serving in the decision-making process is not ideal.

While there are a multitude of not-for-profits in Pakistan working for the job placements of people with disabilities, they usually specialize in a specific disability or focus more on the advocacy side. NOWPDP has created its specialization and image as a cross disability organization helping employers in not only hiring people with disabilities but also helping them with the process of becoming disability confident. Although we ran

other programs such as a vocational training center, wheelchair project, special school, clean drinking water facility, and the rickshaw project, we were known mostly as an organization helping employers become disability confident.

### **How I Became Part of NOWPDP?**

My journey at NOWPDP evolved my understanding of disabilities, and it started on the day when I began working there. I was in the early stages of my career. Whenever I went for a workplace interview, I would usually come back and email the person who interviewed me, thanking them for their time. I remember when I was interviewed at this organization, I met three individuals. One of them was our executive director, the second one was from Human Resources, and the third person was my program manager. During the interview, I learned that the program manager had a visual disability.

I had a great interview, but when I got back, I sent emails to everyone except the program manager. I was so sure that this person, who is not able to see, would not be able to use computers as well, so I did not email him. I was selected for the job. On my first day, I met my program manager. Throughout the day, he was using his computer, which confused me. Initially, I thought that since he had headphones, he might be listening to phone calls or music. I was so sure that he would not be using his computer because I thought that he would not be able to. Suddenly, I saw him using his keyboard, and I was confused about how this was possible. I observed him for an entire day and did not ask him this question.

The next day, I gathered my courage and asked him how he was using a computer. My program manager smiled and told me how a screen reader works, and through a screen reader, he can use the computer like anyone else. I was good at technology and understanding computer-related things, and instantly thought about how I could be so ignorant about the use of a computer. This made me aware of the world of digital accessibility. My interaction with my program manager taught me about different models of disability and made me aware of the United Nations Charter for Persons with Disabilities and the social model of disability. I came to this organization because I wanted to do something good for humanity, but my approach was between charity and the social model of disability.

In the past, I really believed that charity was the only means through which you could change and improve the lives of people with disabilities. However, my interaction with my nephew and his interactions with the world made me realize that something was wrong. When I was looking at disability from an outsider's perspective, I thought that it was fine to feel pity and help people with disabilities through charitable initiatives. But when I had someone from my family with a disability, I somehow felt that this was derogatory if he was treated the same way. Coming to this organization, meeting my program manager, and learning about the models of disabilities and the United Nations Charter for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities made me feel comfortable with the idea that I was not alone in this equation. There is a large population of people with and without disabilities who think the same way. This was a huge relief.

From my conversations with my program manager, I learned about different regions and how they have struggled and achieved their rights, and how people with disabilities in those regions are living way better than people with disabilities in Pakistan. It felt a little disheartening when I compared the situation of people with disabilities in Pakistan to those in the global North, but it gave me a sense of relief that at least there is a place somewhere – where change has happened, and we need to follow their path if we want to improve the conditions of people with disabilities in our country.

My program manager was the first person to give me basic sensitization, so I was better equipped to interact with people with disabilities. When you are introduced to the world of disability etiquette, there are many things to understand, but he told me that even if I did not remember all the disability etiquette required to interact with a person with disabilities; I should remember to ask that person if I was confused regarding how to proceed. He told me that if I learned only this lesson, I would be better equipped to deal with any situation when it comes to interacting with a person with a disability. For example, if you see a person with a lower limb disability at a bus stop, do not assume that they need assistance in crossing the road or getting on or off the bus. If you want to assist or facilitate, ask them if they need assistance. Before that, I had never realized that it could be offensive to directly assume that a person with a disability needs help, as many people with disabilities might not need it.

He asked how I would feel if I were sitting in a park, and a random person came and put a burger in my mouth, saying that it was lunch time, and I must be feeling hungry. He told me that when you ask a person with a disability if they need some

assistance, they may be offended. He told me not to feel disheartened in such a situation but to be empathetic to the systematic discrimination that person might be facing in their everyday life.

### **Barriers to the Job Placement and the Underlying Causes**

To understand the barriers and challenges faced by people with disabilities, it's necessary to understand the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a concept popularized by Kimberly Crenshaw. The intersection of different social locations, such as gender, age, disability, race, among others, plays a major role in experiencing privilege and discrimination (Hankivsky, 2014). People with disabilities can't be identified as a homogeneous group because the intersection of different social location interacts together and creates a unique experience. For example, a person with a physical disability from a similar socioeconomic class is considered differently amongst employers based on whether that person speaks English or not. A woman with a visual disability is considered different from a man with a visual disability. These intersecting social locations have an impact on hiring, based on what I have seen during my interactions with employers.

As Pakistan is a Muslim majority country, the intersection of religion with disability also plays a role. The concept of zakat, a religious charitable donation required to be paid to the poor and underprivileged by Muslims who can afford it, is believed to be given only to Muslims (Zakat Foundation of America, n.d). So, the intersection of religion and disability in the context of Pakistan would treat a person with a disability

who is Muslim and a person who is not Muslim differently. The intersection of education and disability was one of the most prominent intersections that we see in our daily interactions and how employers would consider people who got their studies from reputed national universities or foreign institutions to be treated differently from people with disabilities who had neither of them.

### **Inaccessible Public Infrastructure**

One of the biggest challenges faced by people with disabilities in Pakistan is related to commuting. When you have limited accessible means of transportation, no matter what kind of accessible educational and economic opportunities are available in the economy, people will not be able to reach places. Accessible public transportation is only available in a few large cities in Pakistan, which does not cover the whole geographic location. During our work with people with disabilities who would come to our vocational training center, the biggest barrier they faced was commuting. We would meet many people with disabilities who wanted to be part of the training program. However, since there was limited accessible transportation, most of them were not able to access those opportunities. As a result of this, we were required to provide pick up and drop off services for the trainees. Since people with disabilities are spread around various areas, transportation was the biggest cost component. for us. Although, through the support of our donors and well-wishers, we were able to provide free transportation to the trainees toward the training center, but when they graduated from our center, they were forced to get their transportation.

In some places, if they managed to get any jobs, the minimum wage for people in the province of Sindh is Rs. 25,000, which is a little less than 100 U.S. dollars. Since public transportation was inaccessible, many were required to take rickshaws or taxis, which would cost at least Rs.800 to Rs. 1000 a day, which is around three U.S dollars. If you compare the minimum wage to the cost of transportation daily, a person with a disability would hardly get any financial benefit from doing a job if they are working on a minimum wage. There are governmental programs that allow duty-free imports of cars less than 800CC for people with disabilities. On the face of it, this seems like a great opportunity because taxes on imported cars are more than 300% in Pakistan. This means that if you import a car duty-free, you would be in great benefit. However, the process to get this approval is so lengthy that it is practically close to impossible for a person with a disability to import a duty-free car. While there are many hurdles, one of the biggest hurdles is around licensing. For a person with disabilities to import a car, they are required to get a driver's license. Since there are very few retrofitted cars available in Pakistan, it is practically impossible for a person to learn to drive and get a driving license without a car. So, if a person is not able to import a car, then how will it be possible for that person to get a driver's license? It is like a chicken and egg situation, which means for a car you need a license, and for a license, you need a car. This is just one hurdle; there are several hurdles that are part of this policy.

Although many people with disabilities are restricted to their homes due to inaccessible transportation, many have managed to find a way. For example, many people with lower limb impairments have retrofitted the usual two-wheeler motorcycle to

a three-wheeler motorcycle and they use this for commuting. Many people with visual disabilities use motorcycle ride-hailing services like Bykea for their commute. In comparison with buying cars, it is significantly cheaper to get a regular motorcycle and retrofit it to a three-wheeler motorcycle and use a motorcycle taxi instead of getting a taxi. Services like Uber have initiated their motorcycle services considering the economic realities of Pakistan. Rickshaws are particularly popular among people with disabilities. Although they look quite compact in comparison with cars, due to the structure in which they are designed, they are preferred. If you are a wheelchair user and there is a hatchback taxi, it would be difficult for a person in a wheelchair to carry a wheelchair in that car. But if you are in a rickshaw, you can easily carry a wheelchair in the back seat, and the floor of a rickshaw is designed in such a way that the shift from a wheelchair to a rickshaw is comparatively easier than to a car.

While there are multiple barriers for people with disabilities to access different opportunities, inaccessible public transportation plays a major role in the exclusion of people with disabilities. Based on my interactions with many colleagues, I have heard stories of how they were not able to continue their education because their primary education was close to their home, but when their secondary school moved to slightly farther places, they had to discontinue their education. It was also a frequent scene for me to see many people with disabilities getting job opportunities, but they had to decline those opportunities because they were not able to get to their workplaces for the same reason.

While several persons with disabilities used public transportation and personal transportation to come to our facility, we received many calls and emails from different people with disabilities who wanted assistance figuring out their commute. We received calls and emails from many people who had never left their homes alone. It was easy for them to come to our facility for a few days, but they could not come regularly because there were not enough people at home who could accompany them.

For a person with a disability, specifically for a person with a visual or physical disability, it becomes extremely challenging because the culture of people with disabilities travelling alone is not common. Let me quote the example of my nephew. Although we have the means and resources, my sister does not allow my nephew to go out alone. He is now in his 20s, but he has not gone outside alone because he needs assistance to maneuver inaccessible transport and get to the places he needs to go. The fear of persons with disabilities and their loved ones is genuine because the country is not designed in a way to create trust in the minds of people with disabilities and their families. You cannot encourage people to move out of their homes to look out for opportunities in the absence of an inclusive environment. After one or two months, I would meet a person in my facility who would be coming alone to our facility for the first time in their lives.

There is limited accessible public transportation in a few cities. The bus rapid transit system has become accessible, but only in certain areas. While the bus rapid transit system has accessibility features, to reach public transportation, you still must use an inaccessible path. The system is not designed in a way that considers each step of the

life of a person with disabilities from a system thinking lens. Many times, when people with disabilities conquer their fears and go out to access inaccessible public transportation, they not only face physical barriers but attitudinal barriers as well. We did a small experiment a few years ago where we asked a colleague who had a mobility disability and worked at our office to come along with us to a nearby bus station to see if the bus would stop after seeing him in a wheelchair. Although this bus stop was not at a busy location, we saw many buses go by.

In my early years at NOWPDP, I also got the chance to meet one of our early trainees who came to our office for training on a tricycle. His home was located around five kilometres from our training center, but it took him almost two hours to reach our place. He lived on the 4th floor of his building. He would come down by sitting on the stairs. It would take him more time to get his tricycle out because it was usually surrounded by a multitude of motorcycles parked outside. It would take him almost an hour and a half to reach our training center, which could have taken a person without a disability on his bicycle around 20 minutes.

We collaborated with the government of Sindh and adopted a special school in the district of Sujawal, where the government provided us the financial resources and we ran the operations. While doing community outreach for the project, we got a donation from an organization to distribute food packages among people affected by COVID-19 and wheelchairs to people with disabilities. I particularly recall a person whom I met there. He was a person with a visual disability who came to our facility to get a food package. He had a stick in his hand and was barefoot. One of my colleagues saw him and

came to me asking if she could donate some money so he could buy a pair of slippers. I went to that man and asked him about his life and a little about why was not wearing slippers. Before meeting with him, I had assumed that he was extremely poor and was not able to afford a pair of slippers. However, upon meeting with him, he told me that he could navigate his entire village on foot. He did not wear slippers so he could feel the puddles, potholes, and road material to know where he was, and it helped him locate where he wanted to go. This incident shook me hard. While I was amazed at the ability of this man to navigate his village on foot. At the same time, I thought it was extremely unfortunate that he had to roam around barefoot in extreme heat because there were no facilities for him to access the places where he wanted to go.

**Pre-conceived Notions about Persons with Disabilities**

To better understand how people with disabilities are perceived in society, we can apply the stereotype content model. According to the stereotype content model, we perceive a social group, or a person based on two dimensions that include warmth and competence (Cuddy et al., 2008). Warmth refers to how a person or a social group is perceived in terms of friendliness and being well-intentioned. The opposite of it is cold and unfriendly. Competence refers to our perception of whether we consider someone capable, effective, and competent. The opposite of it is ineffective and incompetent. We perceive a social group based on the combination of both these vectors. If someone is considered less warm and less competent, we have a contemptuous prejudice against them. We consider them low status and have resentment towards the social group. Examples of this group can be people who are recipients of welfare, to whom people may have an idea that they are consuming resources without any output.

Social groups that are perceived as more warm and less competent receive a paternalistic prejudice against them. We tend to have pity towards them and consider them low status. Examples of this group can be people who are elderly, people with disabilities, or housewives. For people who have low warmth and high competence, we have an envious prejudice against them. Though they are considered high status, we tend to have jealousy against the social group. An example of this group can be extremely rich people. The social groups that are perceived to have high warmth and high competence are admired by society (Durante et al., 2017). These are the groups people generally tend to be part of and want to be close to.

If we analyze the general attitude of society towards people with disabilities based on this model, we can analyze why people have a general sympathetic attitude and a sense of pity towards them. There is a possibility that they consider people with disabilities as having low competence but high warmth. This model also helps us understand that if we want to change the perception of people with disabilities in society, we can do it by improving the perception of competence. This can be done by ensuring that they have equal opportunities to get a better education and by sensitizing the public so they can change the perception of competence.

While physical barriers restrict the mobility of people with disabilities and access to opportunities, attitudinal barriers also play a major role. I have seen these attitudinal barriers playing differently in different situations. When I joined this disability organization, I was excited, and I thought people would be generally empathetic to people with disabilities. But an incident changed my view. At my workplace, I was hired for an initiative called the Rickshaw Project which had created a fleet of hand-controlled rickshaws that can be driven by people with lower limb disabilities. Since this project was creative in its idea and implementation, we received invitations to present this project at various events. One such engagement was in a major public space in Karachi, where they had organized an event to celebrate the vibrancy of the city. This program was organized in one of the most prestigious venues.

My colleague with a disability, who drove a rickshaw, had to make a speech at the event. Three of us including him, my other colleague, and I went to this event. I was driving the car, and in the middle of the road, my car broke down. Initially, we tried to

fix things, but unfortunately, I had to take my car to a mechanic. As this was taking a very long time, I told my colleague to go to the event in a private taxi. My colleague with a disability had his wheelchair in my car because we thought that this venue must have extra wheelchairs for those who might need them. My colleague went to the venue and requested the security guard for a wheelchair. Seeing my colleague with a disability sitting on the floor and requesting a wheelchair made the security guard furious. He told him that the venue did not have a wheelchair without checking if there was anything available. My colleague sat there for almost an hour before I reached the venue after getting my car repaired by the mechanic.

I took out the wheelchair and helped him sit on it, and as we entered the venue, we saw more than 10 wheelchairs sitting idle. This was a most disappointing moment for me. The security guard had assumed that my colleague might be a beggar trying to enter a venue meant for the prestigious people in the city. It was such an unfortunate incident. Even when my colleague tried to explain to the security guard that he had been invited as a guest and had to make a speech at the event and that he was the reason many people were attending, the security guard did not believe him.

For a person with disabilities, physical barriers and attitudinal barriers are part of daily life, and they must deal with them regularly. One reason why people generally have a negative attitude towards people with disabilities is the idea that we hardly see people with disabilities in workplaces, recreational spaces, and educational institutes. If you don't see them in these spaces, one generally assumes that they cannot work, get an education, or have fun. Most people with disabilities that you see are most often people

experiencing homelessness or require charitable support on the street, which further solidifies the image that people with disabilities can only survive through charitable support. This creates certain preconceived notions that are difficult to break.

Opportunities need to be created in society so they can be seen as regular citizens. Apart from my Montessori class, where I met a person with a disability, I never saw a person with a disability in my primary, secondary education, or during college and university years. This is rather surprising because all the educational institutes I studied in are progressive and large enough to accommodate people from different sectors of society.

This incident provided an interesting insight into how people generally treat a person with disabilities based on the company they are in. For example, if a person with a disability was accompanied by our office colleagues, people treated them differently as compared to when they went to those places alone.

Although I think that visibility is one of the underlying challenges that create negative stereotypes of people with disabilities in society, I also think about how visibility can be increased if there is no physical accessibility. It's like a chicken and egg situation. You need to be visible to highlight the issues you are facing and to create a positive perception of yourself. However, for that to happen, you need to have physical accessibility, and physical accessibility is not possible if you don't create visibility to put pressure on governments to do something for you.

This incident was the first big reality check that I had. As soon as my colleague went inside and made his speech, he became the center of attention due to his brilliant

story and excellent narration. He was even covered by different media outlets. But it's surprising to see that the same person wasn't even allowed to enter the venue initially and had to come to the stage to make a great speech to create a positive perception about himself.

### **Overprotection, Sensitization, and Mental Health**

The social isolation caused by factors like inaccessibility and attitudinal barriers at times makes parents overprotective of their children with disabilities. As a result, their chances of getting exposure to the real-world environment are limited. During my initial days of employment, I met a person with a visual disability who came to our office because he wanted guidance on how to get education and employment. I was a little confused because he was almost 26 years old and did not have any educational background. I asked why he did not complete his education or any vocational training., He told me that he went to school when he was a child and had no disability, but when he acquired a visual disability, he was restricted to his home.

His parents were overprotective. Even if he wanted to get a glass of water, his parents would not allow him to leave his room to get water. Everyone was at his service. Although he appreciated his parents and everyone around him, his father was nearing 60, and he was extremely tense about what would happen after his father's retirement. He was the only child, and he wanted to do something to contribute.

In this context, I met many parents who would say that their biggest concern was not today when they are able to take care of their children, but when they were too old or

when they died. There are few support systems in society. It was a new and unique situation for me, and it made me rethink my assumptions about people with disabilities. I got to know about many people with disabilities who had a difficult time acquiring education or skills because their parents were overprotective of them.

As I became integrated into the culture of the organization, I frequently met people who would tell me stories about how they had come out of their homes after years and years of being confined inside. I was especially interested in the stories of people's first day going out alone, and I noticed that many people would get extremely emotional when sharing this journey. Many would share that they were enormously stressed about going out for the first time.

Hearing the stories from many disabled people about their first day going out alone, I came to understand why the pressure of acquiring education and employment is so intense in countries like Pakistan that people where do not have the resources or time to address the mental health of people with disabilities. Whenever there was a discussion about creating opportunities for disabled people, they would generally talk about creating better educational institutions, providing transportation, and creating accessible workplaces where people with disabilities could access the basic needs of life. However, very few would focus on their mental health condition.

### **Hopelessness with the System**

When you want to create opportunities for people with disabilities, you must sensitize the parents and the people at home. For example, we met many parents who did

not want to send their children with disabilities to educational institutions. The major reluctance in sending their children to school concerned the benefits a child would receive getting an education with few opportunities available. There were a few people with disabilities who worked in mainstream workplaces. In my experience, most people would generally assume that people with disabilities are unable to work. This assumption was quite prevalent in rural areas, and I saw this when I went to the district of Sujawal for our projects.

I met many parents and disabled people who were shocked to hear that people with disabilities in the urban areas of Pakistan go to schools, universities, and work in offices. Before meeting us, they had no idea that something like this was possible. This lack of awareness was very common. This was particularly shocking because the district of Sujawal is almost a two-hour drive from Pakistan's financial capital, Karachi, where I lived. These two locations were just a few hundred miles apart, but the needs and the level of awareness were so different that we had to run our programs quite differently in both places.

### **Ethical Dilemma in Portraying the Image**

The major operations of our organization were supported through donations. Unfortunately, most non-profits in Pakistan, are highly dependent on individual and corporate grants. Similarly, our organization received government funding, but major sustainability was achieved through private, corporate, and international donations. When

raising funds where the concept of charity is extremely prevalent, you cannot get funds by just focusing on the positive side. So, we had to balance our approach here.

On the corporate side, we highlighted the positives of hiring people with disabilities and created an image that built the brand equity of the community. On the other side, we had to emphasize the challenges faced by these individuals who face difficulties in an emotional tone to show how donations can play a major role in their lives. We would always come under this ethical dilemma about how to portray a positive image while ensuring the sustainability of the organization.

Whenever we used this scenario, I thought about this quotation: "You have to live to fight another day." So, if you are completely going against the system, you won't be able to create the desired change. We live in a society with values, beliefs, and practices, and you can't expect people to immediately change everything that they do. But we tried our best to portray our messaging in such a way that had a positive portrayal while still aiding organizational sustainability enhancing the impact of our work.

We tried to use only those kinds of communication channels where we had control. For example, when we wanted to promote our messages through media, we would try our best to only reach out to programs that had a reputation for running news packages or programs with a sensible tone. While we did try our best to maintain this kind of messaging, there were still challenges. For example, there was a famous company that made a beautiful documentary for the Rickshaw Project. They had a huge budget and hired an extremely professional media agency to create the video. I was very excited because as we were a non-profit organization, we could not afford that kind of

production house to create the video for our projects. I was delighted about how I could use this video to convince donors and partners.

After many days of shooting, editing, and finalization, we got access to this video. It started extremely well and looked professional, and we were all tremendously excited about this project. But there was one line that completely went against our mandate. While it was in Urdu, in English it meant, "This project has the ability to bring out these people from the darkness of disability." Although they focused on everything that was perfect for us, this line, which was towards the end, did damage.

So, we had two choices: whether to use this video or not use this video. This was a difficult question because we knew that if we had 100% control, we would not be able to fund such a kind of production. We thought we would play this video in our events and our meetings, and once this video was played, we would highlight that part and we would say that we did not agree with this line. Initially, we thought this was going to be a challenge, but this became a good opportunity to discuss this issue and initiate a conversation.

### **Advocacy and Sensitization**

At NOWPDP, I was initially assigned as its operations officer for the Rickshaw Project. Although helping to provide employment opportunities to people with disabilities was the major purpose of the project, it also heavily focused on advocacy and awareness. When you want to create economic opportunities for people with disabilities, you do not need to educate people with disabilities. You must make society understand

that that disabled people are employable, if provided with opportunities. This is especially necessary where few disabled people are visible in the workplaces.

Karachi is one of the in the world's most populous cities, and the rickshaw is the main vehicle that people use to commute. Riding and driving a rickshaw are challenging. We wanted to reinforce that if a disabled person was able to drive a rickshaw in a busy metropolis like Karachi, they could do anything. The Rickshaw Project served as a great example to showcase this. We would go to different institutions to share this story and to sensitize the audience. These interactions not only created awareness but also helped us reach out to various places for possible fundraising opportunities and job placements.

Sensitizing people from these organizations, we would sometimes go to offices and educational institutions. My first interaction was at an English-middle school in Karachi. I, along with my manager who had to conduct the sensitization session, went to that school along with my colleague who drove one of these rickshaws. Although these students were quite active in their class participation, I observed that when my manager started interacting with these students, they were not participating the way we expected. They were nodding to everything that was being said, and we were not able to generate a dialogue.

We tried our best that they would ask us tricky questions which would help challenge our presentation and create an atmosphere where everyone could learn and understand the underlying causes behind the discrimination of people with disabilities in society. We started the session, conducted a few exercises, and ended the session. Although the session ended within the stipulated time and we received praise from the

management, I was not satisfied because I knew that the students were not opening up. They were not discussing issues, and if we were not able to understand what was going on in their minds, we would not be able to address the issue and make our sensitization presentation impactful and truly sensitize the participants so they could have a better understanding of the needs of disabled people and how they should be interacting with them.

Luckily, I was able to meet a few students, and I was able to connect with them and find out what their views were. Most of the students were not forthcoming because they were fearful that if they said something wrong in addressing a person with disabilities, specifically my manager with visual disabilities, and our rickshaw driver with physical disabilities, they would be offended. Even when they were interacting, they were giving calculated responses. This insight was helpful, and later, when we designed this program for other institutions, we tried our best to develop and implement some ice-breaking exercises before we started the session to make them feel comfortable, even if they were making any mistakes.

Learning from the above incident, we would generally start the session with the usual terms through which people with disabilities are identified or addressed. Before going toward the audience, we would be the first people who would identify two such terms, and generally, these two names would be extremely negative. By doing this, I ensured that the audience felt fine even if they had to express their biases and use negative words that are generally heard in society. So, we would create a list of those words initially, and we would move towards the United Nations notion of addressing

everyone with person-first language. Seeing this, the students got comfortable from the start while expressing themselves, knowing that even if they said any negative words, it was not going to impact or hurt any individual with a disability.

When I experienced this incident, I understood that at times people with disabilities are addressed with negative words, and sometimes there are positive terms., There is a large section of society that does not interact with disabled people for fear that their interaction or actions may hurt or offend them. It presented us with both a challenge and an opportunity. If you want to make a positive change, it's easier to start with those people who don't hold any polarizing perceptions about this population and can easily be turned into allies.

### **Why Job Placements and Challenges in Our Approach**

While we ran several projects for the inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society, ranging from the provision of wheelchairs, food, identity cards, and vocational training, our major focus was always on job placements for people with disabilities. We knew that job placement is something that can possibly have a trickle-down effect on other aspects of life.

We engaged with various employers. In many of these interactions, our first engagement was around highlighting the benefits organizations can achieve by hiring people with disabilities. This included better job retention, better compliance with government policies, and the overall creation of an image of being an empathetic organization. We also highlighted challenges they might face in the placement of people with disabilities, ranging from physical to attitudinal barriers, but our overall focus was mostly on positives. Sometimes we collaborated with governmental entities to engage in highlighting the legal repercussions if employers fail to keep up with the legal quota.

### **Our clients and their views about themselves and society**

There are around 205,456 registered companies in Pakistan (Abbas, 2023) and a large undocumented sector in the economy. While it was difficult to have a general view of them, we categorized companies to help us create a strategy to better engage based on the likelihood of them accepting our programs. We mostly reached out to companies who were known for philanthropic contributions or running diversity and inclusion programs.

This was discovered by following CSR awards, diversity and inclusion awards, and advice from our board members who hold leadership positions in the business community.

I have attended hundreds of meetings with the employers. Based on my experience of working with our clients, I can highlight three major motivations for employers in initiating disability confidence programs with us. The first motivation is religious, the second is a competitive advantage, and the third is a mix of both. From my experience, organizations that fall under the first category have provided us with decent job placement numbers, but we received limited success in other elements of disability inclusion. Leadership from these organizations often saw themselves as blessed and felt a religious or social responsibility to do something for the less privileged. Employers whose major motivation is competitive advantage are more prone to ensure that the organization is prepared from an infrastructure and attitudinal perspective. They considered themselves progressive and wanted to be seen by the industry and customers as an empathetic and socially responsible organization.

### **Our Role as Head Hunting Agency**

We started our program for the economic empowerment of persons with disabilities through our job placements initiative. In the initial phase, we identified employers interested in hiring people with disabilities. Then, we connected people with disabilities with the relevant skill set through our community outreach efforts. We worked like a headhunting agency. Although this initiative yielded good results in the short run, when

we measured the long-term impact, we observed many employers either terminating contracts after a few months or keeping employees in the workplace without substantial tasks to help them advance. Sometimes we would see people leaving the organization after a few days or months. Some cited that workplaces were not accessible, unacceptable, or they were not being assigned tasks based on their abilities. When I think about these challenges, our experience at a textile company in Karachi comes to mind.

We reached out to a prominent textile exporter based in Karachi through our board members for possible placements of people with disabilities in their manufacturing plant. The idea was to start with a small group of deaf individuals and gradually convince them to hire more people with disabilities. Based on our initial conversation with the employer, we received a positive response and managed to secure placements for five deaf individuals. We were excited and selected these individuals, briefing them about their job responsibilities and the workplace. The employees were to join the office the following week. To our surprise, we received a call from the employer stating that none of the candidates had come to the workplace. We were surprised and a little embarrassed upon learning this. We tried to reach out to those candidates and found out that they had all discussed internally that the workplace was offering wages that might not be enough to sustain their monthly expenses, and there were almost no opportunities for promotion. We were surprised because none of the candidates had discussed these concerns with us beforehand and had accepted the job offers.

We managed to convince the employer to hire five alternate candidates. This time, we only selected candidates who had a good rapport with our organization and

were reliable. Even if they did not want to join, we were confident they would at least communicate with us before making any decisions. We were confident with this new arrangement. On the first day of work, two individuals did not show up at the workplace again, but three did. Although we were not entirely satisfied, we thought at least three individuals had joined unlike before. Out of these three, one had a physical disability and used a wheelchair, and he was also from a religious minority. The other two individuals were deaf.

After a week, a person with physical disabilities came to our office to discuss the challenges he was facing at the workplace. These challenges included the workplace being inaccessible for him. While he could reach the plant in his wheelchair, accessing the washroom was extremely difficult. Additionally, some people around him felt uncomfortable sharing food because of his different religious background. We understood his concerns and tried to motivate him to continue working. We assured him that we would do our best to convince the employer to address these issues. We also interacted with the employer, and they made efforts to minimize some of the challenges. However, after a few months, all these candidates left the organization. This scenario was not unique to this company as we encountered it frequently. Employers would initially be excited about initiating this program, considering it as a CSR opportunity. However, the vision did not translate well to the middle and lower management. Based on these realities, we had to completely overhaul our program.

### **Transitioning to Disability Consulting**

The experiences made us realize that direct placements of people with disabilities might be good for bumping the job placement numbers in the short term, but this is not a sustainable strategy if you want to keep the placements for the long term and make these organizations disability confident. We had to do more, considering this we initiated our disability consulting program. This program prepared the employers, so they were better prepared to welcome and retain disabled people in their workplace. Our consulting program was not a cookie-cutter solution for every organization. We suggested solutions based on the organizational realities. To understand this, we conducted accessibility audits and focus groups. Accessibility audits gave us an idea of what needed to be improved in the organization from an infrastructure perspective. The focus groups identified what changes needed to be made from an attitudinal perspective.

We began this program with one of the leading conglomerates with companies ranging from food, fertilizer, power generation, and more. It had its business operations in multiple cities. This was one of the big successes of our organization, to have a company on board that had both the financial resources and organizational commitment to make those changes. This also allowed us to do a lot of research required to be better equipped because there were hardly any examples in Pakistan before for an organization that committed to be truly inclusive and not just implement small fixes to have a few people with disabilities on board.

We initiated this program with the organization in 2014. Before them, we reached out to a multitude of companies to collaborate with us on this disability consulting

initiative. While many were receptive to the idea, they wanted to get the results as soon as possible so they could showcase this as a success story. Based on our experience in the past, we have already had many programs with several entities which addressed only the situation and the challenges on the surface. But this time, we wanted to address the issue at its core.

While we had numerous objectives, two primary goals of this program were to ensure that the engaged organization is empowered enough to continue its journey of inclusion even after we leave the organization, and the second one was to ensure the retention of people with disabilities who would become part of the workplace. We ran a massive round of focus groups across the organization at various levels. During this exercise, we also managed to meet various people with disabilities who were already working at the workplace. When we met them, they were happy to know that the company is taking an initiative for them and wanted to hear their perspective. It was a surprise for these organizations as well because they had no idea that they already employ a few people with disabilities at their workplaces, and they never got to know about them.

We had the commitment of upper management, but sometimes it became extremely difficult to get support from people at other levels, which was necessary for us to conduct these massive rounds of focus groups. Many people would just assume that this is just another fancy initiative which would not have a long-term impact and would interrupt their efficiencies because they had to take extra time out for it. Once we were done with the focus groups, we presented the analysis and developed a list of

recommendations. This included several infrastructural changes and policy improvements that were needed. We forged a partnership with the Institute of Architects Pakistan to help us with the accessibility audits. Although the institute was appreciative of the idea and agreed to provide us with technical expertise, there was limited expertise in this subject area.

Our organization was primarily responsible for making recommendations, and the consulted companies involved were mandated to make those infrastructural changes through their recognized vendor. Based on our contractual obligations, we made the recommendations but faced issues when it came to implementing those changes. Sometimes it was internal resistance, sometimes it was not just legally possible for them to make those changes. The head office of that entity was in an office building which was not owned by them, so all the physical changes that the company could make were inside their office. Coordinating with the building management and the office administration to make those changes brought red tape. Sometimes the changes would be such that they may disturb the ongoing functioning of various departments that can impact production.

We chased the organization, the vendor, and different people associated with the equation with limited success. This experience led us to the conclusion that although the organization has financial resources and commitment, it might still be difficult to make changes which are considered internationally accepted. For example, people with visual disabilities usually need tactile walking surfaces to maneuver the physical space. The kind of tactile walking surfaces we saw international guidelines were not present in Pakistan. The only option was to get them through import, which would have been

extremely expensive and could add extra time to the project. This gave us the idea that although international guidelines can serve as our direction, we must modify a few things based on the market realities.

In various instances, we would come up with frugal solutions to minimize cost and time. Instead of using tactile walking surfaces which are used in the global north, we used the metal sheet used on the bus floors which has a certain kind of tactile feel to it. We knew that not all organizations might opt for frugal solutions, so we made recommendations which are internationally recognized and added our local solutions as a possible way around. So, if the organization is not able to make changes based on international standards, they could still come up with something local that would increase the level of accessibility at the workplace.

One of the biggest challenges we faced in our engagement with companies like these was that the organizations were extremely motivated when we began the engagement, and as the months passed, they lost interest. A lot of time was spent on research and recommendations, and when the actual implementation part came, which included making the infrastructural changes and hiring people with disabilities, it became a huge challenge for us. Although the organization made this commitment initially, as the months passed, the organizational engagement dwindled due to fluctuating business needs and changes in the workforce.

Once we reached out to a leading bank for possible funding for our vocational training program. They were receptive to the idea and invited us for a meeting at their office. I was excited and reached there on time, meeting the head of the department. This

leading commercial bank had created a separate entity that served as an independent foundation and supported humanitarian projects. We created a presentation and briefed them about our vocational training program and how it would create an impact by inculcating skills required for job placements. In one of the slides, I mentioned our previous collaboration with this bank for our disability consulting project. Upon hearing this, he was surprised and asked me about this project.

When he asked me for more information about this project, I was surprised because we initiated this organization-wide program two years before. Their website had a video on the project. Although I had briefed him about this project, initiated with the support of their chief executive and ran across different departments within the bank, I was a little surprised that they did not know about this program, because they are responsible for undertaking projects with non-profits. When I reflected on the situation later, I realized that this bank, which has more than 1200 branches across Pakistan and a workforce of more than 20,000, it was highly likely that word of our program had not spread throughout the organization.

### **Skill and Demand Gap**

After convincing organizations of the need for placements of people with disabilities, one of the biggest barriers we faced was filling the gap between the skills required for a particular job and the minimum qualifications needed and the availability of individuals with disabilities in the market who had similar educational backgrounds and skills. Since people with disabilities historically have limited opportunities to be part

of the educational system, and once they are not part of the education system, it's technically difficult to find those disabled people with the right skills and education. The population of people with disabilities in higher education was so low that I know disabled people who were studying in major universities in Karachi. Initially, it was difficult to make organizations understand that it's unjustified to have the same recruitment criteria for marginalized groups. Many of the employers took pride in highlighting themselves as equal-opportunity employers without realizing that there is a need to make society and the corporate world equitable. If we make everything based on equality, it's like racing at the Olympics where everyone is allowed to run half a kilometer before the start of a 1-kilometre race, and one person is not allowed to do so.

The impact of colonization also plays an important role as, no matter how educated you are, if you are unable to speak English you face difficulty getting into the workplace. This brings us to the concept of cultural capital which is a concept introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Lareau & Weininger (2003, p. 567), "The concept of capital has enabled researchers to view culture as a resource one that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and, under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next." Being a former colony of Britain, Pakistan is influenced by colonization. A major element of cultural capital in Pakistan is the ability to speak and understand English. The better English you speak, more and better opportunities open for you. It is a reality in many former colonies and applies to Pakistan and people with disabilities. Neocolonialism, which is the term define a form of indirect exploitation and control that occurs in post-colonial times, creates

different intersections of social locations. The more you look and sound like colonial powers, the better social standing you have in society and the better economic mobility you can achieve.

After initial setbacks, we realized the need to manage expectations beforehand. So, during the consultancy project when we were doing sensitization sessions and policy improvements for the organization, we would start the process of job mapping. We would sit with the leadership team of the organization to identify all the roles available in the company, and we would match the educational and skills requirements of the people in our database. We maintain a database that contained more than 10,000 people and had various filters to identify people with disabilities based on their location, educational background, skills, and disability. Since many organizations we worked with were not completely ready to make all the accessibility changes, we identify roles where we could fit specific kinds of disabilities. For example, if a bank was starting its journey of inclusion, there were a few roles where there was a possibility of getting massive hiring. Like, consider the operations of call centres and universal tellers. Our call center program for people with visual disabilities was extremely popular, and we used this project to promote the right message in the organization. We accommodate people with physical disabilities in roles like a universal teller.

Although many people would argue that it's not completely right to stereotype people with disabilities for specific kinds of jobs, we must understand that we are operating in a country like Pakistan where there are laws for disability, but they hardly get implemented. To convince organizations to become inclusive, we found it extremely

difficult to make everything inclusive all at once. So, we start our journey gradually and slowly, and we recommended organizations based on their ability to make those changes. This does not mean that we should not identify the right way of doing things. For example, when we did accessibility audits for an organization, we would have three kinds of recommendations for that workplace. The number one recommendation would be the world's best practices. The second would be the medium level, and the third would be the basic. To contextualize this through an example, I would mention the case of a ramp. According to international standards, a ramp should have an elevation of 1:12 feet, which means for every foot of elevation, the ramp should be at least 12 feet long. This would allow a wheelchair user to access the facility without any external support. Although we would ideally want the organization to implement this international practice, it was difficult in places. Evaluating banks for accessibility, many branches were located very close to the road, and it was not practical for them to make those changes. So, we would recommend the international standard, a medium level of compliance, and the fewest possible changes needed to make their workplace accessible.

### **Innovative Strategies that Resulted in Successful Job Placements**

#### **Creating Success Stories and Case Studies**

Our objective for job placement was to create successful examples that could be shown as case studies and gradually convince organizations to take the next step. Many organizations that were initially reluctant to hire a few disabled people. After the success

of their pilot, they were interested in hiring a large group disabled people. Some companies also convinced other organizations in the same industry to follow the same course.

A close analysis seems to be influenced by the Social Cognitive Theory. According to Schunk & Usher (2019, p.1), “Social cognitive theory is a psychological perspective on human functioning that emphasizes the critical role played by the social environment on motivation, learning, and self-regulation” It suggests that our behavior is developed through the interaction of our personal characteristics, our cognitive processes, and the environment around us (Schunk & Usher, 2019). Learning through observing others and the consequences of their actions. there is more likelihood of being able to do it. If we apply the concept of social cognitive theory in the work we did with our employers, it speaks to the motivation behind working with industry leaders and creating success stories and eventually case studies. When we worked with employers, we wanted to make sure that they succeeded.

We were not only creating change in their organization but also sending a message to other organizations. This phenomenon worked on the ground as well because it was always a little difficult to reach out and get an agreement with a particular partner in an industry. They wanted to be part of something that was not only theoretical but worked on the ground as well.

Initially, we had many debates about whether our actions would help strengthen the stereotypes already in the minds of the public about the abilities of disabled people due to job mapping. Job mapping is an idea where we mapped specific disabilities with

specific jobs in the organizations. We thought that it was necessary for organizations to at least meet and understand the issues faced by people with disabilities, so they were equipped moving towards inclusion. We thought that the integration could ultimately lead to inclusion. Ideally, we wanted people with disabilities to have competitive skills and education and everything required enabling them to compete for any position in the workplace. But to start this process, we must begin with the process of integration.

### **Vocational Training Program and British Council Research**

To ensure that we get the right resources for job placements when we do disability consulting projects with organizations, we initiated a project with different vocational training centers in Karachi like Aman Foundation and Hunar Foundation. These vocational training centers are among the best, and they also receive support from various international and local donors. When we recognized the need for skills training for people with disabilities, we thought of making mainstream vocational training centers inclusive rather than opening our centre. The idea was to ensure that these centers have the capacity to accommodate people with disabilities in the future without our intervention. In this way, we only needed to ensure that these institutes can accommodate people with disabilities with rights resources and training.

For our trainees with physical and visual disabilities, we ensured that the centre used their ground floor for training, and for our trainees with hearing and speech disabilities, we ensured that we had a sign language interpreter assigned to this project. From a financial perspective, this cost us the tuition fees required by these training

centers, along with the fees for accessibility services and community outreach efforts. From an implementation perspective, this was a great idea, and it was working well. However, from a fundraising perspective, it created a major problem for us. Whenever we reached out to our donors, they would ask us questions like why our organization would want the donation when the training is being conducted by some other non-profit organization. In some cases, we would meet individuals who were already donors to these training centers, they would ask why they should donate to our organization, as well.

Initially, we thought that this was being asked by a few organizations, and if we made our message clearer, this would not be a problem. We thought that if we made them aware that, apart from training costs, we incur costs in community outreach recruitment and accessibility services. However, was not working.

After trying it for a few years, we encountered significant difficulties, and sometimes it was also extremely challenging to convince these training centers to introduce special training for our trainees, who had better chances of getting jobs. Duplication of funding, high training costs, and our lack opportunity in choosing training programs led us to open our vocational training centre. During this process, we had the received support from the British Council Pakistan to conduct research for them identifying skills needed by people with disabilities in Pakistan for better job opportunities. This research was extremely useful in helping us identify the vocations that we could offer in our training center.

### **Getting Industry Leaders on Board and a Sense of Urgency**

We experimented with various strategies to expand our disability consulting project. One strategy was to reach out to companies that are considered industry leaders. Once you had trendsetters on board, it was easier to convince other businesses in the same sector. Furthermore, it encouraged trailblazers from other industries. For example, when we reached out to Habib Bank Limited, we convinced them that there were no banks in Pakistan undertaking a comprehensive disability confidence program. We also indicated that the bank could become a sector pioneer in terms of disability inclusion. This idea gave them the notion of creating a competitive advantage and a better brand image with their customers. The sense of urgency made them realize that if they did not come on board as soon as possible, there would be other competitors who would.

We were successful in getting Habib Bank Limited on board with 30 model branches across three cities in Pakistan.

We reached out to competing banks, telling them that Habib Bank had already started its journey to inclusion. If they want to keep up with the competition, they should also take up this project. We never kept a clause in our legal agreements that we would only be working with a specific institution. As many industry leaders are part of different associations. There were a few institutions who reached out to us, inquiring about our services.

One of the best responses was from the textile sector. Textiles remain the biggest export of Pakistan, employing the largest number of people second only to agriculture. A leading textile company Soorty Enterprises, specializes in making denim, reached out to

us after learning about our work at Liberty Mills. not an industry leader. Textile export companies do not generally do marketing on the domestic side, as their buyers are international companies.

### **Public Relations**

Through our engagement with Soorty Enterprises, we were hopeful that this would give us opportunities with other companies. When we launched our project with them, we wanted to invite multiple media outlets to cover the story. We knew that a random memorandum of understanding being signed by two companies would not get media attention. So, we wrote the message to make it attractive to the media.

Our engagement with Soorty started with the commitment to hire 30 people with disabilities who would receive training at our facility, while the company would bring the equipment and trainers. Once these trainees were trained for one of their plants, they were to be placed in the company. We had the option of inviting the media by simply highlighting it as a MoU Signing Ceremony between NOWPDP and Soorty but by high the event as the “Launch of a Denim Production Training Unit and Job Placements of 30 People with Disabilities”, we made this event more appealing. When we sent this invitation to the media, a multitude of newspapers and TV channels came to our office to learn more about this denim production unit and the people with disabilities who were being trained.

The next day, the leading newspapers, famous amongst the business community, covered our story. This not only prompted other textile companies to reach out to us when we

reached out to other textile companies, they knew that we already had initiatives with Soorty Enterprise. It created credibility with other players in the same industry.

The local partners of companies like Inditex, which owns Zara, reached out to us because they wanted to implement a similar program in Pakistan. Sometimes people working in organizations, where we were doing our disability inclusion initiatives, would move to other organizations and they would become our ambassadors there. They would push their new employers to collaborate with us because they had seen the work and the impact it created. One such example was a company called Indigo Textile. A person who collaborated with us on Soorty Enterprise moved there and pushed their management to start a pilot program with us and managed to get their leadership on board for this idea.

Our engagement with industry leaders created a snowball effect and helped us reach many more companies through word of mouth. As we moved forward with working with more companies, it not only increased our experience in knowing what works and what does not work, but it also created a brand image amongst companies. NOWPDP eventually became a go-to place if any organization in Pakistan wanted to make their workplace disability confident and needed help with it.

### **100 Days 100 Lives**

I believe our ability to not shy away from making changes based on the evolving environment was one of our biggest strengths as an organization. During the first phase of COVID-19, our entire operation came to a halt. Our major mandate revolved around vocational training for people with disabilities and helping organizations become

inclusive for people with disabilities. During COVID-19, when there were lockdown around the country, our operations were heavily affected. Our entire strength was our ability to place persons with disabilities in effective jobs. This scenario not only impacted the number of placements we could make in that year, but we were receiving constant calls from our previous beneficiaries who were placed by us in the past, requesting that we do something for them as they had lost their jobs. The industries on which we relied heavily, textile and banking, were some of the earliest ones to be affected. Although we wanted to do something for them, we had no idea how to make job placements possible in such an environment. We knew that a few industries like IT and retail were open during lockdowns, but we had limited contacts in those sectors.

We collected a database of 100 most vulnerable individuals who were our top priority for job placements during that time. We thought of creating a network of volunteers who could collaborate with us, helping us reach out to those industries where we couldn't reach for possible employment opportunities. We knew that engaging volunteers remotely might be challenging because we only wanted to reach out to those potential volunteers who would have contacts at places where we could employ our past trainees.

We also knew that even if we managed to engage those potential volunteers, it would be difficult to maintain a sort of accountability because they are not full-time employees of our organization. So, we identified these two challenges: one of attracting our required batch of volunteers and the second was of creating a sense of urgency that motivates those volunteers to reach the target within a specific time.

When you have a timeline attached to a target, it creates a sense of urgency. I knew this from my experience of raising funds for various programs. If I am willing to collect funds for a school and I have a target without a deadline, it won't create a sense of urgency for potential donors. They may think there would be others who could help. If I want to raise funds for a school, I would ideally showcase the story of a potential beneficiary with a message that this child and many like him can start their studies from the next term if they get support by May 19<sup>th</sup>.

Considering these two aforementioned factors, we came up with a campaign called "100 Days, 100 Lives." We created stories of all 100 trainees for our social media. The idea was to recruit 100 volunteers who would be assigned individually to these trainees with disabilities, and the target was to help each individually assigned trainee get a job within the next 100 days. This campaign was extremely successful, and we managed to get the kind of potential candidates we were looking for. Since we knew that many candidates would complete the online forms but may not be as committed as we wanted, we made a condition of attending an introductory session, which was conducted on-site and online. We did a short version of sensitization for these volunteers, so they were better equipped to interact with their assigned trainees. Most of the volunteers were professionals from middle management and senior management.

Although this campaign was publicly launched, we motivated all the employees of our organization to send this message to people they personally knew who could get these trainees placed. As there were 100 volunteers, we knew that if they were assigned to a small team, they might not be able to engage them. So, all the senior and middle

management of our organization also volunteered for the project. There were around 10 individuals who were assigned 10 volunteers each, and they were given the target to engage those volunteers, ask for updates, and arrange on-site or online sessions of the volunteers with a trainee with a disability, and monitor progress.

After the efforts of 100 days, we were not only able to get job placements for 100 individuals, but we managed to reach more than 110 job placements. This was one of the biggest successes for us and a completely new experience for everyone. This introduced the idea of how to engage the community to fulfill the mandate of your organization. Many of the placements were places that were completely new. This exercise not only created 110 job placements but also helped us create more organizational relationships with those companies whom we didn't engage before. It opened doors for us.

On average, the volunteers reach out to five companies for possible job placements for their assigned trainees. After reaching out to an average of five organizations, they got job placements at one organization. The word of mouth this entire exercise generated helped us later as well. For example, a person reaches out to five organizations, and four might not have an opening at that point in time, but when there was an opening, many of these companies reached out to us.

### ***Ethical Dilemma***

Though the campaign was successful in achieving its target, various ethical questions came into my mind later when I started doing my master's in disability studies and subsequent work at a research organization where I am currently employed in

Canada. All the hundred stories that we collected were featured along with the picture of the beneficiary. From a marketing perspective, this was the best thing we could do if we wanted to create a massive impact. We obtained permission from everyone. But later, when I reflected upon this, I thought about the power dynamics in this context, which played a significant role because our beneficiaries were not able to say “no” to us.

We were offering the service without any charges required from them. It was not like they had multiple options from where they could select or any bargaining power with us. Although we were polite and generous in our approach, the power structure in this context played a major role. If I had to design the same campaign right now after my master’s and my work at this new workplace, I might have thought about this thing, which I did not focus a lot on during this campaign. The only thing that came into my mind was that if I wanted to feature the story of a person with a disability, the only thing I required was their permission. I am referring to this because one of the colleagues that I met a few months ago told me that when she was in her early career, she allowed one organization to feature her story, her struggle, and everything that was going on with her at that point in life. Later, that person succeeded a lot, completed her PhD, and made a lot of progress. But that story, which was featured some years ago, remained in the digital space forever. She regretted her decision to share that story and allow that organization to feature it.

### *The Impact of Power on our Operational Processes*

Although, when we interacted with people with disabilities, our intention was to benefit them, but it is necessary to analyze how the power worked in those situations. French philosopher Michel Foucault played a major role that can help us understand, analyze, and critique the power dynamics. According to Foucault (1988, p.12), “Power is everywhere.” Generally, when we talk about power, it is commonly understood that big institutions like government and bureaucracy hold the power. But power is everywhere, and it operates at multiple levels, present in various discourses, relationships, and interactions. There is a strong connection between power and knowledge. Those who have power create the knowledge structure, and those who have knowledge hold the power. Foucault also highlighted the discursive nature of power and how language plays a major role in exercising power. He also introduced the concept of panopticism, where there is an internalization of norms due to the feeling that everyone is under surveillance (Foucault, 1995). If you apply this analytical framework to the way we operated, you could understand how the nexus of power and knowledge played a major role.

Being a Pakistani organization operating in disability inclusion, we were heavily influenced by the Western concept of what is inclusion and what is not inclusion because of a perception that what is done in the West is better, and the body of knowledge they have developed in disability is superior. Although no one ever compelled us to apply these concepts in our projects, there was an invisible power that influenced the literature and what is considered best practices.

When we take pictures of our beneficiaries so they could be featured on our marketing platforms for generating donations and showcasing the impact, we take consent from them. We thought that asking permission was just enough, but when I apply this framework to this situation, I can see that our institution had different power dynamics than the person who benefited from our programs. These beneficiaries were studying in our programs free of cost, so they had little power in this situation to say “no.” If I compare the same situation to a government program in Canada for job placement, where government funds job placement agencies, and a person with a disability is required to choose the agency of their choice. That person has better bargaining power because there are numerous agencies to choose from. They even have the choice of complaining to the government if they are not satisfied with the services.

This framework also highlights the importance of language and how we present a particular concept shapes our social norms. The sensitization sessions that we organized, the media interaction that we did, and the literature that we developed—we ensured that the language was dignified and respectable enough, portraying a better brand image of people with disabilities in Pakistan.

### **Industry Partnership and Public Events**

While we targeted specific companies when we reached out to them for job placements, at various points, we have reached out to industry chambers to spread our message. Some of them include the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industries (KCCI), Overseas Chamber of Commerce and Industries (OICCI), Korangi Association

of Trade Industries (KATI), Pakistan Business Council (PBC), and Pakistan Institute of Corporate Governance (PICG). All these interactions were significant as they allowed us to meet people from a wide range of viewpoints.

Most of the time, we interacted with multinationals with a global mandate of disability inclusion. Although they would not completely agree with the idea of inclusion the way we saw it, they at least knew that this is something to which they couldn't directly say, "no". We also met companies that were local but aspired to be like multinationals and were receptive to the idea of disability inclusion. However, we rarely met companies run by families or small business owners. So, going to these industry chambers gave us a great learning opportunity to understand how a large chunk of businesses think and how people with disabilities should be included in the workplace.

From my observation, whenever we would meet them, we would have an initial conversation, and we would always hear this sentence from the leadership of these chambers: "People with disabilities are, especially blessed people, and whenever God takes one ability from you, he gives you other extraordinary ability." When we further discussed this issue with them, we realized that most of them were seeing this issue from a charitable approach. They were great talkers, but we made little progress in achieving anything. Our whole purpose in meeting these industry chambers was to allow our organization an opportunity to talk to its members about how our organization can help them become disability-inclusive workplaces.

Although many of these chambers did not help us make any concrete progress, they were at least fine in their conversation with us, except for one chamber that

represents over 100 companies in a specific industrial area. They were quite defensive and when we started our conversation with them, they told us that all their members knew about how disability inclusion works, and they were already taking steps to make their workplaces accessible. He said their members already had many people with disabilities working for them. Our approach was not to criticize these companies as we had just reached out to that chamber to offer them an option of an organization that could potentially assist them in understanding the issue and help them if they required assistance. But the representatives took it unexpectedly and thought that we had come to their place to criticize them for not doing enough to make their member companies accessible. It was a little disappointing for me to see a person who was sitting in a leadership position in a leading industry chamber who just did not want to hear anything. He appeared to be a progressive person and the way he spoke initially when we were trying to make an appointment with him.

I can recall another meeting with one of the chambers, which was extremely funny for me. I, along with my executive director, went to this place to explain to their director how we could help their members. This organization trained directors in corporate governance. We thought it was a good opportunity for us to integrate disability inclusion into their curriculum and possibly talk with directors getting training because they are in influential positions. I remember my director and I meeting that representative, making a long pitch about how our organization worked and how we could work with their institute. He made a pitch of almost 5 to 7 minutes, and after that, the person responded in one word, which was "OK." I was a little surprised and expected

that the person would say something more, but after that "OK," there was a long silence, and I took over and explained the programs that we have and how we have assisted many organizations. After the pitch of my executive director for five to seven minutes, I made another pitch of 3 to 4 minutes, and after I was done, that person said, "Great." At this point, we were both confused because we had never been in a meeting where a person in a leadership position spoke in one or two words.

From this interaction, we understood that this person was simply not interested in taking any action, and he was not even courteous enough to at least speak his mind. He was simply showing that he didn't care. We stopped that meeting and said that we would send more information via email. We went outside and laughed about this interaction and how funny it was, and we also shared this story in our office about our hilarious interaction. But, deep down we were disappointed and thought that people in leadership positions are supposed to take the responsibility of making sure that the corporate world becomes more accessible, but this person simply didn't care.

Although we faced a lot of disappointments when we reached out to different chambers, there were a few organizations that at least took the responsibility of sharing the word about our organization with their fellow members through email and in their reports. Though we were not successful in this endeavour in the short run, in the long term, it made an impact. We received random invitations from these chambers about CSR-related meetings or events, which gave us a platform to share our story with a large audience and create awareness about the work we did. I can recall an HR event in which there was a discussion about diversity and inclusion. When they talked about inclusion,

they also talked about disability, and a vast majority of people were quoting our organization as a potential resource.

At one point, we organized an event for the human resource fraternity of Pakistan, which was a panel discussion where we invited two of our partner companies and one representative from the government to discuss disability inclusion. This event was branded as "How You Can Make Your Workplace Inclusive." To our surprise, over 100 senior HR leaders registered for this event, and at least three companies came on board to our program because of this event. After this, we started making such events frequent because we knew that they created a positive impact.

### **Collaboration with the Government of Sindh**

Although incentivization plays a major role in motivating organizations to be inclusive, many times penalization through the government contributes to pushing companies to make a certain move. There are disability laws that penalize organizations that don't hire people with disabilities based on the required provincial quota, but this is hardly implemented. We always tried our best to make this possible through our interactions with the government. Whenever we reached out to the government to inquire if they were making any efforts to penalize organizations not fulfilling the job quota, we heard that they didn't have a mechanism to do it. It must be noted that when I am referring to the government here in the context of implementation of the job quota, it's primarily the government of Sindh with whom we interacted the most because our organization was based in the province of Sindh.

As the government doesn't have a mechanism to penalize the organization, the organizations hardly knew that such a law existed. So, we requested the government of Sindh that if their department doesn't have the capacity to enforce or assist organizations in this context, the least they can do is to remind organizations about their legal duty and the possible consequences they might face in case they do not implement it. We created a list of 100 organizations that we thought could be pushed for being disability confident and forwarded it to the government of Sindh.

We requested them to draft a letter highlighting that the government of Sindh introduced a new regulation in 2018, which makes it mandatory for organizations to hire at least 5% of persons with disabilities. If they fail to do so, they will be required to pay an equal amount of penalty that they would have paid a person with a disability. So, if an organization is required to have five people with disabilities and they are not hiring them, that company is legally bound to give a minimum wage for 5 people with disabilities to the government as a penalty. The entire purpose was to create a sense of fear. Along with the same letter, the government of Sindh quoted the name and contact details of our organization in case these organizations needed any assistance in becoming disability confident. Once this letter was sent, it created a buzz among these employers, and many reached out to us. Sometimes with a request for help, sometimes with contact details of their legal departments to gauge if they were in trouble.

Many organizations just reached out to test the waters because they knew that receiving such letters from the government is not new, and they are used to handling such situations. But the best thing about this initiative was that many organizations, almost

40%, reached out to us, was a success for us as a first step to understanding how the organizations were dealing with disabilities at their workplace. We created a self-assessment form online, which we gave to everyone reaching out to us. This form included over 25 questions ranging from physical accessibility, attitudinal barriers, training, policy, and the number of people with disabilities already at the workplace. We designed the questionnaire that could identify a monthly penalty that the organization is required to pay if they are not fulfilling the quota.

Once these companies filled out this questionnaire, we arranged meetings with them to share the results, highlighting how much penalty they could get from the government in case they did not hire the required number of people with disabilities. We would also emphasize that hiring people with disabilities is not enough as they must conduct disability confidence programs in their organizations if they want to place the right resources and retain them as well. This was perhaps one of the few times we adopted a negative reinforcement strategy to push employers. Our carrot approach only worked at those workplaces that were receptive to creating a positive public image, but we hardly worked with those organizations which were not proactive about a public image such as B2B companies. This strategy gave us the avenue to reach a number of those workplaces which had big potential but were difficult to convince through the carrot approach.

We shared the results of this program with the government and asked them if they did not have the capacity to have a team that can reach out to companies, they can outsource this operation to our organization. We suggested that we could build a

dedicated team for this project that would work with the government and our organization. Though we were excited and received a decent initial response later, this could not be materialized. Working on this project made me realize that if you want to make people implement something, positive reinforcement doesn't work every time. You must create an element of fear among corporate entities that if they do not fulfill the legal requirements, they must face consequences. It's like driving; you don't just encourage people to follow the rules voluntarily, but there are legal consequences if they fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

### **Engagement with the State Bank of Pakistan and Banking Policy**

Our engagement with the government departments made us realize that, though the government has laws that compel organizations to fulfill the job quota of a person with disabilities, they don't have an enforcement mechanism to ensure this becomes a possibility. Though we faced challenges here, we knew that there is an entity in Pakistan known for its strict measures and enforcing regulations, and it's the State Bank of Pakistan, the central bank of the country.

For a long time, we have been trying to convince the State Bank of Pakistan to create a comprehensive policy along with timelines that ensure commercial and microfinance banking institutions become accessible for customers and employees with disabilities. I can recall that we sent a letter in 2015 referencing an existing law by the State of Pakistan that requires banks to provide a few accessible services for people with visual disabilities, but we could not get hold of them. We wanted our engagement with

them for a long time because the State Bank of Pakistan is known for imposing heavy fines on commercial and microfinance banks if they do not comply with the regulations.

Ideally, this kind of compliance should be in the overall government infrastructure, but this was not the case. So, we have been keen on engaging them for several years. Sometimes we would engage; sometimes we would have a few meetings, but we were never able to get hold of them for any meaningful agreement. It was in 2020 when we received a call from the office of the President of Pakistan that he wanted to call a meeting of the State Bank of Pakistan along with commercial banks so they can formulate a comprehensive policy and guidelines for making the banking sector accessible. They wanted our assistance as a subject-matter expert on it.

We were a little lucky in this case because we had a relationship with the President through our board President. This is a rare situation because it's extremely unlikely that any organization would be able to get a connection with the president. It should be noted that Pakistan has a parliamentary system, and the president is mostly a ceremonial position with little executive power but even though it was good enough for us. Though he had limited executive power, the president of Pakistan was a senior leader of the political party in the federal government, so he had influence in the government from the other side. After the call from the president's office, we were excited but a little skeptical as well because we have been trying for a very long to engage the State Bank of Pakistan but were not truly able to engage them.

This meeting was conducted online because there were COVID-19 restrictions in place. To our surprise, all the presidents of the commercial and microfinance banks

appeared, including the governor, deputy governor of the State Bank of Pakistan, and the president of Pakistan himself. It was a big thing for us, and many bank presidents showed up in that online meeting, as well. Online communication, which became common during COVID-19, was also a blessing in disguise because having presidents of these leading banks present on a platform together is a rare sighting. Our executive director, the president of the organization, presented their case in the meeting, and because of that meeting, it was announced by the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan that they would form a task force within the central bank to work on this policy.

The task force for this policy was to have people from State Bank of Pakistan, members from the banking sector, and members from civil society. The deputy governor of the State Bank was made the chairperson for this committee, and the governor himself instructed the members to share with him the progress. It was a huge achievement for us; something like this has never happened, and we were over the moon after this meeting because we knew that once the State Bank of Pakistan creates a policy with appropriate targets for commercial and microfinance banks, then these entities would be compelled to make changes that can bring people with disabilities into the workforce and as customers to the banking sector.

Over the next few months, our organization worked with the State Bank of Pakistan, members of the civil society, and the banking sector to design this policy. Our colleagues did brilliant work researching banking policy from the region and from around the world and came up with a decent piece of work. Within a year this policy was approved, and a notification was given to commercial and microfinance banks from the

State Bank of Pakistan instructing them about the policy with a deadline to share their plan about how they would implement this policy over the period of the next three years. As soon as the State Bank of Pakistan sent this notification to the banking sector, we created a proposal that was sent to all the banks offering them our help for this new regulation.

Our proposal, which was followed by the notification from the State Bank of Pakistan, did work as intended. Although we knew that the banking sector would hate us because most of them knew that our organization was the primary driver in pushing the State Bank of Pakistan to create this policy, we were fine with this if they were making any efforts to make their organizations inclusive for customers and employees with disabilities. We received an overwhelming response, and we managed to sign contracts with multiple institutions because of it. I find it interesting that sometimes our organization became good guys and sometimes it became bad guys for companies, but I believed it was necessary. Just assume that if organizations are required to give taxes voluntarily, I am sure that a large majority of the organizations would not give them. It's just the consequences that push many organizations to pay taxes, and in the same way, we would sometimes use the stick approach and sometimes the carrot approach.

### **Technology and the Future of Work**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our training and job placement activities came to a halt, but after a few months of careful consideration, we started our online education. Initially, we thought that since individuals attending our institution come from a lower

socioeconomic background, it would be difficult for them to get access to technology. But we were surprised, our attendance improved a lot more during this phase. This shows that physical barriers played a major role for our trainees although we provided a transportation service for them. We talked a lot about remote work and how it can assist many people with disabilities in doing jobs that they are not able to do in regular circumstances due to inaccessible workplaces and transportation. Even the most technologically advanced companies would hear these ideas but would never take them seriously.

Since the public transportation system is inaccessible many persons with disabilities rely on right-hailing services to access workplaces. If you are earning a good amount of salary, then you can perhaps dedicate a specific portion to private transportation. But if you are new in the market or working at minimum wage, it is practically impossible for you to access private transportation and work somewhere and still make some money for yourself. During the same time, there were a few employers who were taking an interest in the idea of exploring remote work by hiring people who were literate enough to be placed in these jobs. We had a challenge here since most of the people who approached us for job placements were not qualified enough for jobs that could be done through computers. Although this was the case, the hope of being able to earn a respectable living through technology gave us and them enough hope to do something that alleviates the skill set of people with disabilities so they can be employed in jobs that can be done virtually. In Pakistan, there is a major trend of people working on freelancing platforms like Upwork, and there is a growing trend among people with

disabilities who are exploring these platforms. I even personally know many people with disabilities who are earning a large amount of money through it. Though these freelancing platforms are great resources in offering virtual work, due to the precarity of work it offers minimal or no protection or benefits.

### **Experimentation and Learning from Failures**

From my experience, I learned that you should never stop experimenting with different avenues when it comes to pushing organizations. It doesn't matter if you succeed or fail in this endeavour. Even if you fail, you will still create some successes that you will ultimately see in the long term, like our interaction with industry chambers. If you succeed, you can always replicate that particular action to create more success in the future. But if you stop experimenting, you will not be able to see and understand what works and what doesn't work.

### **Inclusion vs. Integration**

Throughout my journey at NOWPDP, we faced this question of inclusion versus integration whenever we would do a project. Although we knew what the ethos of inclusion is, at times, the situation did not allow us to do what we would have ideally done. To give a little bit of context, let me highlight the example of our work for a special school in the district of Sujawal in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. The government schools in Pakistan are primarily divided into two: one for people without

disabilities, known as mainstream schools, and one called special schools. Since special schools have dedicated facilities for students with disabilities, the mainstream schools are not made accessible for persons with disabilities. In the province of Sindh, every district has its own special school run by the government.

It is widely perceived in Pakistan that government schools do not offer quality education compared to private schools. As a result, both systems run in parallel, but most children attend private schools. The problem is not associated with funding; it has more to do with ineffective management, due to which even low-income schools offer better quality education compared to government schools. As a result, the government has collaborated with multiple organizations to run government schools on a public-private partnership. The situation goes like this: the government gives a certain school to a non-profit that has experience in running good quality schools. Instead of the government operating that school, they give a yearly grant to that institution so these schools can offer quality education free of cost in a competitive way. This arrangement has been successful for several years, and now there are thousands of such schools across Sindh running on this formula. This understanding is primarily in mainstream schools but not in the special schooling system.

Our organization identified an opportunity, realizing that as the government is comfortable operating their schools in a public-private partnership, we thought that we could convince them to arrange the same formula for special schools, as well. The special schools in the government sector face several challenges, based on my observation, personal visits, and interactions with parents, non-profits, and leaders running these

special schools. One of the biggest challenges is the low enrollment and attendance of children with disabilities from the locality. As true believer in the concept of inclusion, we would have ideally opted to make the mainstream schooling system inclusive for people with disabilities, but we knew that this was something which is not going to get approved in the short term because the government has dedicated departments, ministries, policies, and procedures in place around special education.

When we were proposing the idea, we had to ponder over the question of what we do in terms of our planning to advocate for an inclusive education system in Pakistan but at the same time try to improve the quality of the existing system in place. Because we knew changing the entire infrastructure of education would be too big an assignment, we should move towards it by getting small wins. Although we had an urge for inclusion, we initiated the journey of integration by making the quality of education better at special education centers offered by the government, so that people with disabilities and their parents are at least more receptive to the idea of educating people with disabilities.

The same thing happened when we connected with organizations for the job placements of people with disabilities. When we interacted with the textile companies, we had the urge to make the entire organization completely inclusive and confident. But we knew that if we insist on organizations too hard, there is a chance that we might lose them even from starting this journey. So, when we interacted with them, we would explain how we could ideally help them in making their workplace entirely inclusive for people with disabilities. We sensed that if that organization was not comfortable or ready at that time, we would recommend a few steps that could at least ensure that we started

the journey with them. Instead of making a textile company completely infrastructure-wise friendly for people with disabilities, we would start an engagement with deaf individuals. If you have a group of deaf individuals placed in a textile company, that company would not be required to make any infrastructure changes apart from small alterations like emergency lights and other arrangements like hiring a sign language interpreter. Initiating this program with small steps made the organization comfortable that they can make some positive changes inside without pushing a lot in terms of finances and changes. Once the organization starts this crucial step, its staff will become motivated to move up the ladder.

### **My Experience of Interacting with People with Disabilities in Canada**

During my first year of education in Canada for disability studies, I started conducting personal research on understanding how job placement or disability inclusion works in Canada. I knew that the legal implementation of the policies by the government would be stronger here, but I wanted to understand how this entire process worked. I knew that, unlike Pakistan, there is no quota system for placements, but it was a surprise for me to know from my teachers, colleagues, and experts in the disability sector that they were not in favour of a quota system. They wanted the system to work in a way that makes it possible for every person to be part of the workplace without any preferential system. I initially thought that it might be due to the reason that there are already

employers who are willing to hire people with disabilities like people without disabilities and there was no disparity. However, from my experience, I have seen people with disabilities who do not have jobs or have jobs that are not related to their qualifications and expertise.

I also got to know that government funding is given to various organizations to assist persons with disabilities and their job placements. To my surprise, these organizations worked somewhat like our organizations in Pakistan. These are dedicated headhunters who maintain a database of people with disabilities. They approach organizations that work with workplaces and people with disabilities for capacity building and job placement. I was excited and wanted to be part of such an organization. It seemed very close to the work I was doing back in Pakistan. In Canada, the Government funds these entities based on the number of people with disabilities placed, and it served as a great motivator for this organization to augment these numbers to earn more. I was excited initially, but later found out most of the organizations which were involved in these projects were paying way below the market.

Another thing that I found interesting when I was looking for jobs was that when you apply for any workplace through online portals, several employers will ask the applicants to identify if they have any disability or if they need any special accommodations. Initially, I thought it was good idea to gauge what is required by the potential employees so necessary arrangements can be made, but later, I delved deeper into it and thought that it could be a way for employers to know that a particular person has a disability so they can directly reject their resumes without even calling them. On

the face of it, it looked like the employers are bound to be non-discriminatory, but it is extremely difficult to prove an employer is being discriminatory to a candidate.

The public transportation system in Canada is far better than in Pakistan, but it is still extremely difficult for a person with a disability to access it. It decreases their likelihood of getting jobs. Apart from public transportation, the overall climate conditions in Canada can be challenging. I am based in Winnipeg, and the city government provides the best possible public transportation system, it is extremely difficult for a person with a disability to access it during winter. For a wheelchair user or a person with a visual disability, it is extremely difficult to travel from their homes or workplaces.

Many people with disabilities who need home care find it extremely difficult to get the required support because the process of getting it is extremely lengthy. A campaign by a woman with a disability who is in major debt and wanted to support her children by going to work. She applied for home care support, but the waiting time for it is extremely long. So, she started a campaign, applying for medical assistance in dying (MAID). The waiting time for it was much less than the time required for home care support.

### **Contributions and Implications**

Many of the projects we built were based on market needs and were developed in response to specific challenges. Therefore, writing this autoethnography will help me structure the innovation process we undertook. It will assist not only me but also professionals worldwide working in the field of disability to implement successful ideas. This transformative process will also enable me to reflect on my own biases and subjectivity. While there are numerous successful methods applied in the global north, there is a scarcity of viable projects for the global south. This research aims to benefit not just my former organization but also other organizations and stakeholders operating in the global south. By avoiding reinventing the wheel and learning from past mistakes, these stakeholders can focus on proven strategies that yield results while being aware of the challenges they may encounter throughout their journey.

One of the common excuses for neglecting inclusion is the high cost associated with it. However, when we have successful case studies that demonstrate tangible results, it becomes easier to convince decision-makers in Arctic countries. In the past, when presenting examples from developed nations to government stakeholders, it often resulted in a dismissive response, such as "It is not possible for a poor country like us; only rich nations can implement such initiatives." To overcome this, we would emphasize case studies from countries like Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

## Conclusion

To promote the employment of people with disabilities in Pakistan, we used a 'stick and carrot' approach to persuade employers to hire people with disabilities. We highlighted the laws mandating quotas for people with disabilities across different provinces, emphasizing the penalties and consequences for failing to comply with these quotas. However, we also emphasized the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, such as the creation of a positive work environment, access to a wider talent pool, and fulfillment of social responsibility. We also highlighted how hiring people with disabilities could lead to a positive word of mouth and a competitive edge.

While there were numerous wins, we faced several barriers that restricted our work for the job placements of people with disabilities. This included an inaccessible public infrastructure that makes it difficult for people with disabilities to reach institutions like schools and workplaces. There are also negative preconceived notions about people with disabilities that they cannot do work, largely associated with the reality that you will hardly see a person with a disability on roads, workplaces, and recreational spaces. As you don't see them, you assume what is being said about them in society. While there are external issues, there are various things that evolve from the family, which restrict inclusion. This includes overprotection that sometimes hampers the social mobility of a person with disabilities. As mentioned in this autoethnography, I have met various people with disabilities who weren't able to acquire the required skills or go out of their homes as their families were overprotective of them.

Based on my experience, a sense of hopelessness with the system also creates challenges. Even though there might be chances of succeeding in society, the system is designed in such a way that nurtures hopelessness. When there is hopelessness in the system, it becomes difficult for organizations like ours to design and implement programs that can provide education and job placements. Our organization tried our best to portray a positive image of people with disabilities, but since the overall culture in Pakistan is embedded in a charitable approach based on what I observed, we had to design our communication for raising funds in such a way that sometimes reflected the adversity of people with disabilities. In an ideal world, we would not be doing this, but as many nonprofits in Pakistan are dependent on individual and corporate donations, you must sometimes do what you don't like because you must ensure organizational sustainability, as well. Having said that, we tried our best to balance our communication so that we still create a better image of people with disabilities.

Although we started our operations as a headhunting agency connecting employers with employees with disabilities, we soon decided that just connecting these two parties was not enough. We then transitioned to a disability consulting organization, helping workplaces become disability confident by providing accessibility audits, sensitization training, policy improvements, and job mapping and placements for people with disabilities. We also introduced our vocational training program to minimize the skills gap required for the placement of people with disabilities. For undertaking this, we initiated several strategies, such as a research program supported by the British Council, where we identified the top skills that can be imparted to people with disabilities to

increase job placements. Based on that program, we started our dedicated skills training program.

To get more partners on board, we tried to engage industry leaders and created a sense of urgency. Once you have industry leaders from different sectors on board, you can engage other industry players of the same sector and leaders from other sectors. For example, we started our engagement with the top national fast-moving consumer goods company and a leading Bank of Pakistan. We ensured that we balanced our work and promoted it by utilizing different channels for public relations. We conducted innovative campaigns like "100 Days, 100 Lives" that connected a hundred persons with disabilities to a hundred volunteers with disabilities so they could be placed at workplaces within a short period of time. This helped us a lot during COVID-19 when we were not only not able to place people with disabilities, but we were also receiving calls from our previous trainees who lost their jobs.

We collaborated with industry chambers and organized public events for the leadership of key companies. We also partnered with the government at the previous points, especially the Sindh Government and the State Bank of Pakistan. While the engagement with the private sector served as our incentive-driven approach, our engagement with the government took a regulatory stance. While COVID-19 was a major setback for us initially, it opened numerous avenues for us, including the acceptance from employers to embrace the future of employment, where people with disabilities can work and be educated virtually. From my experience, the successes that we received at my previous workplace, starting from the job placement of 26 people in

the first year to more than 300 when I left, were rooted in our ability to take risks. We did not shy away from making mistakes and tweaking our programs based on evolving needs and ground realities.

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