

## **Social Exclusion at the Workplace: Experience of Blind Employees in Debre Birhan Town**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to explore the lived workplace experiences of blind employees regarding social exclusion in various government organizations and offices in Debre Birhan Town. To do so, a phenomenological study was undertaken with 12 blind employees (7 males and 5 females) aged 26-42 years selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. To collect data, semi-structured interview was employed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods. The analysis of interview data revealed that lack of blind-specific support services, poor access to alternative information provision, and being ignored were the day-to-day common experiences of workplace exclusion among interviewees. Also, the study established that lack of awareness and workplace inaccessibility were the constituents of social exclusion among blind employees. Furthermore, key inclusionary practices (actions) like creating peer-support networks, empowering blind workers, and inclusive language trainings were claimed by participants themselves to address social exclusion and thereby enhance their inclusion in their respective workplaces. In conclusion, it can be confirmed based on the findings that blind employees have a high level of social exclusionary profile at the organizations or offices indicating that being blind is closely related with being vulnerable to the incidence of social exclusion. The findings have vital implications for delivering training, improving existing workplace practices, and formulating institutional-level accessibility guidelines. Finally, the inclusion of blind employees can be achieved in the workplace through implementing actionable recommendations that are suggested as key inclusionary strategies at their workplaces.*

**Keywords:** Blind, lived experience, visual impairment, social exclusion, social inclusion

### **Introduction**

The existing literature agrees that the evocative concept of social exclusion was first rooted and popularized in France as early as 1970s. Specifically, Silver (2007) made

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known that it was predominantly used as socio-political discourse in 1974 by a Frenchman René Lenoir. Also, its logical opposite twine “social inclusion” was expanded across European countries as a response to tackling social exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007). Until recently, the concept of social exclusion has been widely spread all over the world including developing countries as another way of explaining poverty and disadvantage (Mathieson et al., 2008). In general, it can be understood from a growing body of literature that the term social exclusion is a societal issue in the socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts, and represents complex, overlapping, inherently interconnected, and multifaceted features (Rawal, 2008; Wazed, 2012).

Literatures show that social exclusion can be seen from “human rights” and “participation” perspectives. In one hand, it is a denial of, or limited access to participation in activities that available for the majority and that plays important roles for social integration; alienation from interpersonal relationships (Nishanthi, 2017). On the other hand, it implies lack of equal rights; denial of access to resources, and medical, education and employment services (Dauti, 2015). Also, previous research studies disclosed that social exclusion is related to lack of access to support networks and engagement in relationships (Cater et al., 2011).

In workplace settings, persons with total vision loss experience various forms of social exclusions (Nishanthi, 2017). Based on the review of extant literatures, it can be summarized that workplace social exclusion occurs when persons with severe vision impairments (1) experience poor participation in social-networks in their respective workplaces; (2) face discriminatory practices in the promotion opportunities; (3) get excluded from engagement in activities partially, or wholly; (4) lack access to office services including information that are openly available for the general public; (5) exclusion from special programs and occasions held in the workplaces; and (6) lack of access to integration, and social support networks that avails to everybody in the workplaces (Adugna, 2015; Papadaki & Tzvetkova-arsova, 2013; Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). Importantly, previous studies claimed that interpersonal rejection involves common form of experience of workplace exclusion among individuals with severe disabilities (Richman & Leary, 2009). According to them, being ignored is the most frequently happening form of interpersonal rejection. Other studies also showed that persons with severe vision loss are highly susceptible for silent treatment or ostracism during communication and interaction (Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). In relation to this, Wadegaonkar and Uplane (2017) noticed that visually impaired individuals are most likely to experience the social challenge of being ignored during normal relationships. On the other hand, Williams (2007)

described that ostracism involve being silent to others; being excluded from shared attention or somebody else's responsiveness, and it is very powerful to harm interactions and social relationships.

Research revealed that there are different driving forces of social exclusion among individuals with vision impairments. Tobias and Mukhopadhyay (2017) noted that severe vision loss has the cost of exclusion. Other authors also supported the idea that being blind is directly related to exclusionary experiences (Nishanthi, 2017). On the other hand, studies suggested that there exist negative social attitudes; misconceptions or wrong believes of sighted people toward persons with visual impairment and blind persons (Papadaki & Tzvetkova-arsova, 2013); physical inaccessibility (Appleton-Dyer & Field, 2014); and inaccessibility of technologies such as computers (Fichten et al., 2009) were the contributory factors of the social exclusion of persons with severs vision loss. Nevertheless, the main causes of exclusion may vary with situations or contexts in the community settings, workplaces, education or academic settings (Adugna, 2015; Dauti, 2015; Tirusew, 2011). Utmost, exploring the causes that drive the social exclusion of individuals is one of the ways of examining specific inclusionary strategies and/or actions in these spheres (Levitas et al., 2007; Mathieson et al., 2007; Silver, 2007). Therefore, exploring the many causes of workplace social exclusion among persons with visual impairment is a vital way forward to seek their workplace inclusionary activities (Nishanthi, 2017; Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017).

Disability inclusion in the workplace is more than giving job or recruitment opportunities for employees with disabilities (Ovichegan, 2014). In turn, it involves providing them equal opportunity to succeed, to transform, to be compensated, and to get every access that avails employees without disabilities (Dauti, 2015). In this vein, studies exhibited that creating various opportunities, empowerment and mounting socialization programs involves enablers of social inclusion in the employment areas (Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). In addition, local researchers like Dagnachew (2011) stressed that disability activism, disability advocacy works, and disability rights movements are key strategies to enhance workplace inclusion. Other researchers also illustrated that establishing social support networks and disability-inclusive services are significant strategies to promote inclusion in workplaces (Cater et al., 2011). Furthermore, prior studies revealed that compensatory and alternative strategies are vital to promote inclusion among those with severe disabilities (Fichten et al., 2009). It can be suggested that organizations or institutions are primarily responsible for creating inclusive work environments where everybody can work and enjoy work-life.

To sum up, social exclusion indicates processes in which individuals are blocked from denied full access to limited access, and lack of or poor access to goods and services, various rights, opportunities and resources that benefit others; and normally available to other members/groups (Labonté et al., 201; Levitas et al., 2008;). The reviews showed that the extent of being excluded may vary from complete or total exclusion such as absence/denial of access; detachment or total blockage to limited access, poor access to participation, materials, goods and services or opportunities. In this fashion, other authors such as Mathieson et al. (2008) explained that social exclusion indicates (1) inability to participate in normal relationships and activities that are available to the majority of groups in society, and that normally benefit others; and (2) the act of making certain groups of people within a society feel isolated and unimportant.

Undeniably, social exclusion research works showed that it is a socio-cultural, economic, and political problem that directly or indirectly affects everyone (Rawal, 2008; Labonté *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless, in the same contexts, some individuals or groups are highly vulnerable to it than others (Levitas, *et al.*, 2007). In the context of disability, for example, individuals with disabilities (IwDs) experience different forms of exclusions at workplaces, academic settings and community settings at large (Cater et al., 2011; Labonté et al., 2011; Tirusew, 2011). These authors denoted an idea that there is a strong linkage between disability and social exclusion, and it is clearly discerned in their studies that IwDs have, by and large, a social exclusionary profile. On the other hand, the description provided by Dauti (2015) showed that there are tremendous contributory factors and/or causes that aggravate the social exclusion of IwDs just despite rights, laws, and policies demanding their inclusionary opportunities. In this particular vein, popular social exclusion literature annotated that this phenomenon resulted from varying factors or causes (Levitas et al., 2007; Mathieson et al., 2007; Silver, 2007). Other scholars also strengthened the idea that there are different causes such as attitudinal barriers, systematic challenges like policy-related obstructions and physical inaccessibility that are more likely to contribute to the incidence of exclusion for IwDs (Mbugua et al., 2018; Tirusew, 2011;). Nevertheless, studies revealed that there is a significant individual difference among IwDs in their vulnerability to social exclusion. For example, Appleton-Dyer and Field (2014) indicated in their studies that individuals with severe or profound disabilities are more vulnerable to exclusion than those with mild or moderate disabilities. On top of this, other researchers unveiled that blind individuals are more vulnerable to social exclusion than those with low or partial vision (Mbugua et al., 2018; Tobias &

Mukhopadhyay, 2017). Hence, in the milieu of vision impairment, being blind is directly related to being socially excluded by virtue of total loss of vision (Nishanthi, 2017).

In the workplaces and employment areas, blind people's social exclusion is becoming severe (Dagnachew, 2011; Dauti, 2015; Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). According to these researchers, the experience of workplace social exclusion involves various forms and results from different causes. In particular, those with severe vision impairment face workplace challenges that affect their social status, participation, and contributions (Appleton-Dyer & Field, 2014; Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). Hence, the current study sought to explore the lived experience of workplace social exclusion among blind employees in Debre Birhan Town.

This study is intended to explore the social exclusion of blind employees in their workplaces in Debre Birhan Town. As highlighted in the background sections, Ethiopian and international researchers indicate that persons with severe vision impairments encounter day-to-day experiences of exclusion. In a related manner, research studies adequately displayed that social exclusion and severe vision impairment are closely related to each other (Mbugua et al., 2018; Nishanthi, 2017; Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). More significantly, the synthesis of these studies showed that blind individuals are: (a) less preferred for companionships compared to the sighted peers; (b) systematically prevented from various opportunities; and (c) remain outsiders from involvement and participation in socio-cultural activities. Additionally, Nugent et al. (2016) described that though they are employed and work together with sighted individuals, blind employees are exposed to social exclusion due to different factors. From practical points of view, it can be argued that meaningful inclusion of blind employees is not yet fully achieved in the workplace. As well, from the analysis of comprehensive empirical works, it can be understood that blind employees are highly susceptible to exclusionary experiences due to various challenges. In essence, this prompted the current researcher to posit a conviction that being together with sighted working groups in the same workplaces, these individuals are still experiencing social exclusion.

Nevertheless, to the best search, it is understood that there is a scarcity of substantial empirical findings or research articles that vividly demonstrate workplace exclusionary experiences of blind employees in Debre Birhan Town. Hence, it is recognized that there is a gap of knowledge as there is a dearth of research-based evidence about the phenomenon under study. For that reason, the present researcher is

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equipped with enthusiasm to conduct a study to narrow the knowledge gap regarding social exclusion of blind employees, resulting in exclusionary, and suggest basic strategies for enhancing the inclusion of blind staff members in their respective workplaces in the study area.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought answers to the following basic research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of social exclusion among blind employees at their workplaces in Debre Birhan Town?
2. What are the beliefs of blind employees on the causes of social exclusion at their workplaces in Debre Birhan Town?
3. What are blind employees' perspectives to address social exclusion and thereby enhance their social inclusion at workplaces in Debre Birhan Town?

### **Method**

#### **Study Design**

The main purpose of this study was to explore the social exclusion experiences of blind employees at their respective workplaces. To attain this purpose, a qualitative research approach that involves phenomenological design was adopted because this design was essential to explore and describe common experiences of workplace social exclusion based on their perspectives, feelings, or attitudes.

#### **Description of Study Participants**

In a phenomenological study, participants are individuals who have common experiences and shared understandings with the particular phenomenon (e.g., social exclusion) being studied (Creswell, 2007). In this sense, the researcher has recruited seven (7) male and five (5) female blind employees as research participants. They were working at different Woreda Offices, Zonal Administration Departments, Sub-cities and Organizations at Debre Birhan Town.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

S.N	Pseudo nym	Sex	Age	Marital status	Education status	Employment/workplace
1	DBY	M	29	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Zone Public Relations Office
2	DBG	M	27	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Baso Ena Worana Worda Office
3	DBB	F	26	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Kebele 02 Administration
4	DBE	F	38	Unmarried	2 <sup>nd</sup> degree	Haile Mariam Mamo Preparatory School
5	DBS	F	35	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Debre Birhan City Administration
6	DBM	M	49	Married	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Baso Ena Worana Women's Affairs
7	DBT	F	42	Divorced	2 <sup>nd</sup> degree	Debre Birhan Teachers' Training College
8	DBZ	M	45	Married	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Debre Birhan High School
9	DBO	F	32	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Debre Birhan City Municipality
10	DBA	M	38	Married	2 <sup>nd</sup> degree	Basso Secondary School
11	DBX	M	27	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Zera Yacob Sub-city Crime Attorney
12	DBN	M	31	Unmarried	1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Andinet Primary School

*Source:* Developed by the researcher.

- All participants are employed at different governmental organizations or offices.
- All the names used to represent the participants are pseudonyms.
- F- female; M - male

As shown in Table 1, the participants have different family (marriage) life, educational and work experiences. The table also displays typical personal characteristics of the participants such as sex, age, marital status, and educational profiles. It also depicts that the participants were working at different organizations or offices. On the other hand, it can be understood that participants were from varying social, economic, and political life of working environments. As a result, they can explain multifaceted experiences encountered in their dynamics of work environments. Most considerably, this gave the researcher special opportunity to get access to plenty of information about their exclusionary experiences in the workplace.

### **Samples and Sampling Techniques**

For this particular study, snowball sampling technique was employed to select the research participants. It is understood from the literature that qualitative researchers mostly utilize snowball sampling technique to recruit participants into their study by other potential participants from among their colleagues or connections through a

nomination process (Patton, 2002). Additionally, advices given by Creswell (2007) showed that snowball, or chain-referral sampling is commonly utilized in qualitative studies as to what (1) the issue (s) understudies is among a sensitive topic, (2) the currently enrolled participant(s) help researchers to recruit future participants and (3) the target groups are difficult-to-access at one place. In this sense, it is understood that social exclusion is very sensitive, oppressive and topical issue, and it is the strongest psychological hit for the victims (Silver, 2007). Next, it was found very difficult to locate the members of blind employees as they work at different Woreda Offices, Zonal Administration Departments, Sub-cities and Organizations in Debere Berhan Town.

The researcher employed snowball sampling whereby the existing participants are sincerely asked to identify potential participants from their employed acquaintances or networks. Primarily, the researcher contacted one blind employee as he was previously known in person including his families. The investigator contacted him physically and asked his permission to participate in the current study, and his collaboration to nominate additional blind employees (including their workplaces and contact details) he knew in various departments, organizations and offices in the town. Then, targeting relevant employees, the new participants have selected other prospective participants using their contacts.

Up on the basic premises of snowball sampling, participant selection process through nomination continues till the researcher initially contacted blind participants who have significant and meaningful experiences with the particular phenomenon being studied. At this point, Creswell (2007) recommended that in any qualitative research methodologies including phenomenological studies the number of participants may range from 5 to 25. In most instances, this number is recognized as an acceptable sample size in phenomenological studies (Gay et al., 2006). In line with this idea, it seems to the current researcher that a relatively small number of participants were drawn as data were collected in-depth through consecutive interviews for a considerably long period of time. With this in mind, the data collection process culminates when the interview data become saturated. According to Seidman (2006), data saturation is “*the maximum possible point in which no additional or new information is reported from the research participants*” (p. 55). Thus, the researcher has winded-up the process of data collection after determining that no new interview data were gained from the participants, or when repetition of the narratives of participants comes. Thus, the number of participants in this phenomenological study was limited on the basis of data saturation as a determinant factor. In addition,

phenomenological research participants can be included in the study on basis of eligibility criterion (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the following inclusion criteria were set to select participants:

### **Inclusion Criteria**

To be recruited, participants have to be fitted with the following inclusion criteria set to make them eligible in this particular study. Hence, all of them:

- ✦ Should have total vision loss and with no any other additional disabilities.
- ✦ Can be either male or female.
- ✦ Aged  $>_ 25 - 50$ .
- ✦ Must work at Debre Birhan Town at different organizations, departments or offices.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In a phenomenological study, a semi-structured in-depth interview with open-ended questions is a common data collection instrument to explore the inside perspectives, and feelings of participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Consistent with this notion, the data needed for this study were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews which were vital to sufficiently explore the lived experiences of social exclusion among participants. More specifically, series of key semi-structured interview questions were developed and organized on the basis of the research questions and also modified in line with literatures reviewed in the study. Hence, the interview questions are exploratory, centered on the research questions and can give possibilities for probing other specific interview questions, and for that reason the number of items (interview questions) was not limited.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

For the purpose of this study, interview data were analyzed employing thematic data analysis method. The researcher utilized such data analytic framework to mainly establish common themes and sub-themes of participants' exclusionary experiences. To do so, the following steps were followed: Firstly, the interview data were read multiple times to understand the content deeply. Secondly, key ideas or phrases were identified in the data, and labeled with short description or codes. Thirdly, similar codes were grouped together to find broader patterns or themes that capture important aspects of the dataset. Fourthly, each theme was described in relation to the research question. Finally, the themes were presented in the report using the verbatim responses

of participants to support the analysis. Simply put, thematic data analysis was a key data analysis strategy to answer the research questions posed in the study.

### **Procedures of Data Collection**

Primarily, the researcher described the purpose of conducting such a study for each participant. They were also requested to cooperate and provide relevant data regarding their experiences of exclusion in their world of work. This was to suggest other blind individuals who work in other organizations or offices for similar purposes. Finally, the researcher offered deep and heartfelt thanks for each participant for their cooperation of consecutive interviews, and as they were likely willing to refer other blind workers in other organizations or offices.

### **Results**

This section presents an in-depth analysis of interview data collected from the participants of the study and henceforth, the findings represent social exclusionary experiences they commonly shared though they are employed at different workplaces in Debre Birhan Town.

### **Lived Experience of Blind Employees' Social Exclusion at Workplaces**

The interviewees shared numerous perspectives or stories of experiences that constitute their day-to-day workplace exclusion. As portrayed through the analysis of interviews, it is established that a lack of blind specific support services, poor access to alternative information provision, and being ignored or forgotten were identified as common social exclusion experiences at their respective workplaces in the Town.

### **Lack of Blind focused Support Services**

The participants interviewed in this particular study reported that they are with complex and unmet vision targeted needs at their own workplaces. Among others, visually impaired workers need disability-support services that are important for blind person to work effectively and to equally contribute at the workplace as other sighted counterparts. As thoroughly presented below, DBY exclaimed: *“In my working area, I do not have a human guide to help me to get home as there is a main road outside of the office I am supposed to cross. I beg someone to do so!”* Additionally, DBG conveyed her story as: *“I need personalized support [የግል ረዳት] in my workplace. However, the office never knows about it.”* On the basis of the ideas provided by this

interviewee, blind individuals need personalized support services (PSS) to accomplish their office tasks and day-to-day life requirements, too.

Lastly, DBB resonated as follows: *“Instead of helping me to do so, my office-colleagues often said ‘leave it to me. We will do ourselves instead. We just understand you and your cases [ተይወ...ሰዉ ያንችን ሁኔታ ይረዳል፤ ባንቺ የሚፈርድ የለም].”* In summary, it can be deduced that blind-employees lack disability-specific workplace support services.

### **Poor Access to Alternative Information Provision**

On the basis of the interview data, It is important to highlight that blind employees did not have access to alternative visual information at their respective workplaces. As clearly presented below, DBM, who has become blind since 6 year of age due to night-blindness (Locally termed as: ዳፍንት) shared his ideas. *“...we are totally blocked from any of the visual information and notices that are adequately available for sighted individuals.”* This shows that visual information accessed on noticeboards to sighted workers is not accessible for blind employees. Increasingly, DBN noticed this challenge: *“In the working environment, the public noticeboard was for the sighted, and not the blind. We need a different way to access the information provided for typical workers.”* it can also be deduced from these data that blind individuals have different information seeking behavior. Correspondingly, DBX continued revealing: *“I have no idea about what is going on around unless the sighted told me. Our need regarding information is totally forgotten.”* Once again, this implies that blind employees involved in this study have no adequate opportunity to access visual-information pertinent to their life, profession and work that is normally accessed to sighted workers of organizations.. Still, DBE reflected : *“We need brail-notice boards, or any other alternative means so that we can equally access information availed for others [sighted].”* Here, it can be seen that the inaccessibility of visual form of information such as notices posted on the notice-boards, social cues, signals created information barriers that seriously affected their participation, engagement, social relationship and interactions. Generally, the self-reported indepth-interview data uncovered that participants were relegated from accessing visual information often posted on notice-boards and other visual (gestural) forms of communication like social signals and cues.

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### **Experience of being Ignored/Forgotten/**

It is plausible to comprehend on the basis of the interview data that being ignored is one of the participants' day-to-day experiences of workplace exclusion. Just congruently to this description, DBS reflected the following long narration:

...being employed here, I faced plenty of challenges from sighted colleagues. Of all, it seems to me that they accepted me in office, but they just won't talk to me. I know one has silently sitting at the side of me without talking to me. I do not know why!

This narrative shows that participants were muted (as they were not reciprocally talked with sighted workers), and they were given lesser or no attention during relationships. In the same way, the other interviewee boldly explained as: "*I often feel being forgotten in the office. They [sighted] remain quiet and voiceless just being with me. I do not know the reason for their quietness and soundless.*" It was also worth considering the data given by DBO has unreservedly expounded her feelings of being forgotten as follows:

...being together in the staff lounge, they forgot me with no reason. They did not talk or reply to me when I attempt to reflect on my ideas. They simply overlooked me...! Being a passerby at the side of me, move soundlessly, and the like. They often give more priority and emphasis to their sighted peers. Not for us [blind]! It is very painful.

Given the above data, it is convincing to realize that participants were likely to lack acceptance from their sighted group members. Typically, such a social challenge is ostracism whereby participants were given "cold-shoulder" by the sighted co-workers. Thus, being ignored represents a common form of interpersonal rejection. Importantly at this point, DBM regrettably remembered the situation as "*...physically together, they often banish me! I understand when they silently walking by the side of me, but they never recognize if I know this anyways!*" By and large, it can be argued from in-depth interviews that participants felt being forgotten or ignored and this affected their interpersonal relationship in their workplaces.

## **Causes of Social Exclusion among Blind Employees at Workplaces**

It is evident in this study that blind employees shared their beliefs on the causes for their own workplace exclusions. Accordingly, it is contended in the interviews that lack of awareness and workplace inaccessibility involves key reasons for exclusion.

### **Lack of Awareness**

It is found that sighted workers lack adequate awareness and sensitizations about visual impairment, blindness and people with visual impairment. Subsequently, this challenge has resulted in wrong perceptions, misconceptions or negative attitudes toward participants. In line with this description, DBI largely exclaimed as:

...sighted workers thought that being blind is the sign of sin, curse or satanic, and believe that if the sighted individual touch us [bling], the sighted will be blind, too. This is wrong perception and the support I get from them [sighted ones] is not satisfactory, and their support is not authentic enough, too.

Besides, DBM reflected similar ideas as “... *the sighted staff here brings all wrong perceptions and negative attitudes of the community to this working place, which is really dangerous for me. They often consider me as a man who comes from the other planet!*” In this regard, blind employees were considered different from sighted colleagues. It is also important to highlight the views given by DBT: “... *the sighted employees consider that being blind is being unable to do office-works that they are doing. Some say this: ‘This work is difficult for you. You will do the simplest one!’*” Similarly, DBE who became blind due to refractive errors shared the following:

Some sighted staff members believed that we [blind] are demonic creatures, incapable of doing office works, and unable to fulfill the requirements of office positions as the sighted ones; and also as support-seekers and weak thereof! [Laugh]. They believe that I can’t receive and serve customers as they do unless I am supported by them.

Undoubtedly, the above lengthy verbatim clearly shows that sighted staff associates blind individuals with wrong perceptions and negative meanings. Consequently, participants were unable to get blind-specific-support services in the employment areas.

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## **Workplace Inaccessibility**

It can be affirmed from the narrations that the workplaces of blind employees are not disability friendly. In this vein, DBN noticed as: “...*the compound is full of obstacles to wonder around just for different purposes.*” In the same manner, the other participants also reported as:

The office areas and buildings have ups and downs just in the absence of lifts and other facilities; the offices have upstairs, and the compound has inaccessible roads; and has not ramps, either. I do not feel safe to move around alone. As it is unsafe for me, it affects my mobility to meet individuals and participate in work-environment matters.

Another interviewee also posited his ideas as: “... *the buildings are not constructed considering our needs and interests, but of the sighted workers!*” Lastly, DBO forwarded a brief response as: “*the office has forgotten the presence of persons with visual impairments around. I can’t move around unless I get sighted guide!*” In the other vein, the participants have expounded the inaccessibility of notice-boards. As an instance, DBZ noticed as: “...*Oh! No access to notice-boards and information posted in it!*” In addition to this, DBA was listened replicating as: “*It is a common challenge for all of us [blind]. No means of getting audio or tactile information that can compensate the visual means of information at all!*” Broadly speaking, it is evident to understand two points from the above interview responses. In one hand, the inaccessibility of the physical spaces (physical layouts, buildings, features of the ground, walkways or road) at workplaces obstructed them to meet staff members; to freely and independently move from one office to another; to form relationships, and to get supports from other sighted members. On the other hand, absence of alternative information provision at the workplace impeded participants’ countless opportunities related to their profession, work and social life.

## **Insights of Participants on the Inclusionary Practices (Actions)**

Most importantly, most of the inclusive strategies proposed in this study are provided as claimed by participants’ themselves. In addition to this, it can be deduced on the basis of the interview responses that the organizations and offices need to build inclusive-workplace-culture, and that collective inclusionary efforts like creating peer-support-networks, empowering blind employees and inclusive language training are needed to promote social inclusion and thereby address the participants’ experiences of workplace social exclusion.

### **Establishing Peer-Support-Networks**

As claimed by participants, support networks are needed to reduce their challenge-related experiences that produce exclusion at workplaces. A worthy example of this description was pronounced by DBZ as: *“I prefer that the office need to arrange peer support groups which is vital for us for ease of work-and-life.”* At this point, this story indicated that blind individuals strongly need peer-support in the workplaces. Consistent to this description was an interview response added by DBS as: *“It is too tiresome and dangerous for me to move around to accomplish tasks and mandates. I truly felt oppressed, unsecured and obstructed to go around myself unless I get someone to do so!”* This narration also implies that social (peer) support is vital to accomplish various social and office-related activities. In a more general sense, the claim offered by participants deeply conveys messages that creating peer-support-networks can facilitate socialization opportunities and participation at the workplaces.

### **Empowering Blind Employees**

Succinctly, the insights gained from participants indicated that they need to be empowered at their respective workplaces. They described their need of workplace empowerment in terms of opportunities to understand their environments; opportunities for access to visual information including social cues, and communication signals; opportunities of being engaged in all spheres of work and life; and opportunities for getting capacity building training. At the top of this, DBT provided a general view as: *“I should be empowered by the office such as further trainings to update my work-specific profession.”* Besides, DBO, another participant who became blind due to chickpea (Locally: የፈንጣጣ በሽታ) utterly construed his hopes and dreams through the following statements:

As everyone else, we are eager for many things in the workplace and outside as well. We need to be in all matters as sighted peers. Thus, the office has to do more for us to provide many privileges that benefit the sighted working groups.

Based on the above verbatim, it seems to the current researcher that participants need a more empowering workplace environments, which are vital to (1) advocate their skills and abilities so that sighted peers would change their attitudes and wrong perceptions; (2) socialize themselves straightforward with sighted members, and (3) get peer/social/ acceptances in their workplace.

### **Alternative Provision of Information Services**

In this study, the participants' viewpoints showed that they lack alternative means of accessing any of the visual information that easily and freely avails to the sighted workers (individuals). Hence, they reported that they need alternative strategies as a substitute to access visual information at their workplaces. For example, DBM once said as: "...we need extra means of accessing visual information that sighted peers see using vision." Other participants also reflected similar views that alternative provision of information service is needed at workplaces.

### **Inclusive Language Training**

The participants engaged in this study conveniently claimed that promoting inclusive communication and language is a vital inclusionary practice at workplaces. As an example, DBZ who become blind at the age of 7 due to water reflection stated: "*Ouch! Words matter a lot. Sighted colleagues never know what language is appropriate and what is not during normal communications. Words they are throwing to us [blind] are derogatory and impactful.*" Similarly, DBA added as follows:

Some sighted colleagues utilize harsh and cruel terms when they talk about blind and the activities assigned for or accomplished by blind employees. Some terms lack respectfulness, and really rude terms are often used. For instance, they said አዉሮቹ] when referring to the blind employees, which is oppressive for us [blind].

Furthermore, responses of other participants have indicated similar ideas that inclusive language awareness creation and sensitization training are vitally important for sighted community so that they are more likely to promote inclusionary practices in the context of disability. Bearing this description in mind, it can be suggested that sighted colleagues need to employ disability-responsive terms, words or expressions in the government organizations and offices where this study is conducted.

## **Discussion**

### **Lived Experience of Social Exclusion among Blind Employees at Workplaces**

Overwhelmingly, it has been explored in this particular study that blind employees face access challenges in relation to blind-specific support services, lack of access to alternative information provision and meaningful interpersonal relationships. Thus, it was found that these themes constitute their day-to-day experiences of workplace social exclusions in government organizations and offices in Debre Birhan Town.

### **Lack of Access to Blind- Specific-Support Services**

In this study, it was found that participants with disability did not get adequate support services at their workplaces. In most instances, people with severe vision impairments lack disability support services (Nishanthi, 2017). On top of this, groups of researchers also made known that the individuals with severe disabilities are more likely to lack disability support services such as peer specific support networks (Cater *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, lack of access to disability-specific support services may result exclusions including lack of adequate access to various opportunities, and key services such as medical services, bank, and other social services that are needed for their daily lives (Mbugua *et al.*, 2018).

### **Absence of Alternative Information Provision**

It is revealed in the current study that participants were systematically denied access to information services at their respective workplaces. In comparison to sighted working groups, they did not get access to any form of visual information posted on the notice-boards, and the ink-print texts, too. Additionally, they lack the opportunity to recognize social signals, or cues that are important to foster positive social relationships. This finding has aligned with the study findings portrayed by Mbugua *et al.* (2018) that blind individuals are in most cases excluded from visual form of information in their socio-cultural settings. It can be highly applauded in this study that blind employees need compensatory strategies to access information pertaining to notices, social cues and signals. Similarly, previous researchers observed that persons with severe vision impairment have different information seeking behavior, and hence they need a complementary means of accessing visual information (Fichten *et al.*, 2009). According to Fichten *et al.*, e-learning; computer; adaptive technologies and alternative information support services are vital to access information for those with severe visual impairments. On top of this, other scholars explained that alternative provision of information services such as audio or tactile information is essential for blind individuals at their workplaces, or anywhere else, of course (Nishanthi, 2017).

### **Being Ignored**

As for this study, it has been explored that being ignored or forgotten was one of the participants' interpersonal (relationship) challenges. Most specifically, this study uncovered that blind-employees encountered the experiences of being "ostracized" whereby they were banished during the interpersonal interactions; peer relationship

and communications. For instance, it was described in this study that the participants seemingly lack peer (social) acceptance; were given less or no attention, received silent treatments and no reciprocity during normal communication or conversations. Resultantly, it can be described that banishment or ostracism was the day-to-day experience of workplace exclusion among blind workers involved in this study. In light of this, other researchers also noted that persons with severe visual impairments were highly vulnerable to ostracism as the social signals and cues are not accessible for them through the sense of seeing (Tobias & Mukhopadhyay, 2017). According to these authors, such phenomenon extremely affects the social cohesion and interpersonal relationships of blind employees who work together with the mainstream social settings.

### **Causes of Social Exclusion among Blind Employees at Workplaces**

On the basis of the findings of this study, lack of awareness and workplace inaccessibility were operating as drivers for the occurrence of workplace social exclusionary experiences among blind-employees. Researchers also noted that the social exclusion of persons with disabilities is a phenomenon that mostly occurs due to various factors like inaccessibility (Appleton-Dyer & Field, 2014), and awareness challenges (Rawal, 2008).

#### **Lack of Awareness**

Personally, the current researcher believes that problems such as wrong perceptions or misconceptions on disability-related issues stem from lack of awareness and sensitizations on disability issues. Of course, this conviction is supported by Rawal (2008) that negative social attitudes and wrong beliefs of non-disabled individuals toward persons with severe disabilities are deeply rooted from cultural myths, negative stereotyping, lack of awareness, knowledge and sensitization on the issues of disability, and persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Tirusew (2011) summarized the situation that wrong traditional beliefs and misconceptions that triggered discriminatory practices stems from lack of awareness and knowledge about disability, disabling conditions and persons with disabilities. According to Tirusew, disability is mistakenly perceived by non-disabled society in Ethiopia mainly because of lack of public information and awareness about disabilities. Hence, this study revealed that sighted individuals who work together with those with severe vision impairments lack awareness and knowledge about the disability issues of their peers with severe vision impairments.

In this study, lack of awareness was identified as the most ingrained cause of ostracism for blind employees, and lack access to disability (blind)-specific support services. Different studies revealed in the light of this finding. For example, Tobias and Mukhopadhyay (2017) publicized that some sighted individuals have no or limited awareness and that they have distorted thinking or perception about blind individuals, which completely lead to negative societal attitudes that can easily aggravate their interpersonal rejection such as being ostracized or forgotten. Likewise, other authors noted that individuals with severe vision impairments lack appropriate social (peer) support networks due to the negative attitudes of sighted counterparts (Carter *et al.*, 2011; Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that there are possible strategies to alleviate the negative attitudes of sighted peers toward their blind counterparts. Most importantly, writers like Papadaki and Tzvetkova-arsova (2013) and Nishanthi (2017) acclaimed that wrong beliefs, and negative attitudes that are intensely seated in and heavily resulted from lack of awareness about vision impairment and persons with vision loss can be improved through continuous trainings, workshops and sensitization programs about visual impairment and persons living with it for sighted workers.

### **Workplace Inaccessibility**

The findings of this study exposed that the participants' workplace physical environment is neither accessible nor blind-friendly obstructing them from full access to visual information, and also to blind-specific support services. In this vein, researchers generally scrutinized that lack of physical accessibility and adaptability undoubtedly discriminates persons with disabilities from what they want and are interested in the socio-cultural environments (Dagnachew, 2011; Dauti, 2015; Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). Specifically, studying the experience of individuals with visual impairments, Tobias and Mukhopadhyay (2017) disclosed that inaccessibility of physical spaces, layouts and infrastructures separates their access from social support networks. This finding was also in agreement with earlier study results provided by Cater *et al.* (2011) that access to peer-support and disability-specific support service arrangements can be denied by the inaccessibility of existing physical environments. Once again, researchers marked that lack of adaptability of the physical environment for blind individuals profoundly affect their access to visual information which is vital for participation and socialization in the socio-cultural contexts (Mbugua *et al.*, 2018). Finally, the review made on these research studies exhibited the following: (1) creating barrier-free environment is the responsibility of everybody; (2) instilling a culture of physical accessibility and adaptability need to be

the responsibility of the government (central government, regional or local), and (3) provision of alternative compensatory visual information services to blind individuals requires the collective efforts of leaders of organizations, institutions or offices.

### **Inclusive Strategies at Workplaces: Blind Employees' Viewpoints**

The perspectives of participants showed that more inclusive workplaces are needed in their own particular employment areas. Of course, this requires determinations of the sighted staff and leaders, too in the working environments. In this light, some researchers pointed out the need for agents that enhance inclusion in organizations, or offices (Mbugua *et al.*, 2018). On the basis of their explanations, inclusive practices should be cultures in socio-cultural and community settings. Ethiopian researchers like Dagnachew (2011) also unveiled that self-advocacy and disability rights movements are hugely important to create inclusive workplace thinking, practice and culture. Still, researcher like Wadegaonkar and Uplane (2017) added that socialization programs and opportunities are needed in organizations, workplaces and community settings at large to promote the social positions, social life and statutes of persons with severe vision impairments. Lastly, prior studies also reflected that equipping blind individuals with alternative strategies and information facilities such as computers and adaptive technologies are paramount to: (1) offer compensation for visual and functional limitations; (2) allow socialization opportunities, (3) enhance social integration and defend their rights (Fichten *et al.*, 2009). Likewise, the subsequent sections elucidate the discussion of inclusionary strategies proposed on the basis of the insights gained from interview responses of participants of the current study.

### **Creating Peer Support Networks**

It can be appealed from interview responses and aforementioned discussions that creating peer-support groups is massively important to promote the inclusion of blind employees in their workplaces. This entails that blind employees are demanding the supports of their sighted peers. According to some experts, establishing peer-support networks is crucial to foster inclusivity and increase social connections among individuals with severe disabilities (Dauti, 2015; Nishanthi, 2017). In relation to this, other research colleagues also confirmed that setting up peer support arrangements and networks involve evidence-based intervention practices that are decisive for fostering inclusivity in social contexts (Cater *et al.*, 2011). In workplaces, social (peer) support networks can be established by organizations or institutions which have

multifaceted advantages to ensure independence; increase participation and maintain social fabrics (Mbugua *et al.*, 2018).

### **Alternative Provision of Information Services at the Workplace**

In this study, it has been identified that blind employees did not have alternative means to access any of the visual information that avails to sighted individuals. For instance, it was clearly reverberated by DBO as: “...we have no means to substitute what the sighted workers are seeing.” This shows that the blind employees lack access alternative information provision at the workplace. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that information provision such as auditory or tactile information are needed at workplaces as an alternative strategy to compensate the visual means of getting information (Mbugua *et al.*, 2018; Nishanthi, 2017). Prior studies also indicated that compensatory strategies are needed as alternative provision of information services for blind individuals (Fichten *et al.*, 2009). These research studies showed that visual information should be substituted in alternative information provision services for individuals who are totally blind.

### **Empowering the Blind**

The perspectives grew from participants responses indicated that they need extra-empowerment in their workplaces. To illustrate this point with the participants’ interview responses, one of them noticed stating as: “*I should be empowered by the office such as further trainings to update my professionalism.*” The other interviewee also continued reflecting as: “*We need to be in all matters as sighted peer.*” This interview accounts showed that they require enabling and reinforcing situations to leveraging their independence, capability and social interactions. In this vein, research evidences implied that empowerment of persons with severe visual impairments is indispensable for their holistic psychosocial development (Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). As a whole, it has been identified in this study that workplace empowerment is paramount importance for blind-employees to help them actively take part in all spheres of work and life.

### **Inclusive Language Training**

The participants’ interview responses bared the fact that the sighted working groups never know which languages (words or expressions) shall use while communicating with sever visual impairment and persons with visual impairments. For example, it can be noticed in the interview responses given as: “... they said አጠቃላይ] when

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*referring to the blind employees....*” This apparently denotes that training workshops about the type and usage of inclusive words, communications or language is enormously vital for the sighted staff at the workplaces. Notably, former researchers also underlined those non-disabled persons need to be engaged in inclusive language/communication utilization staff training programs (Wadegaonkar & Uplane, 2017). Accordingly, the utilization of inclusive language is highly impactful to sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion. Further, other researchers stressed that such training programs are essential to (a) stimulate members of sighted staff to have a different view or alternative thinking (positive thinking) about blind colleagues; and (b) to prevent challenges that affect the full participation, relationships, and opportunities of blind members (Nishanthi, 2017). This author also reminded that sighted individuals are advised to use respectful and blind-inclusive expressions while communicating in the context of visual impairment.

### **Implications of the Study**

As briefly highlighted below, an in-depth analysis of the interview responses identifies more general implications of this study for proposing on-job capacity building trainings or awareness creation and sensitization programs, improving workplace existing practices, and accessibility guideline formulations (institutional level). These are properly explained in the following subsections.

### **Conclusions**

In the current study, it has been established that living with severe vision impairment means being highly exposed to lack of disability support services, poor access to information services, and being ignored/forgotten/ in interpersonal contexts. Based on these findings, an explicit conclusion can be drawn to the specific contexts of blind employees participated in this study that they have high level of social exclusion profile in the offices, organizations or institutions in Debre Birhan Town indicating that being blind is closely related with being socially excluded.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, aforementioned discussion, and conclusions made, the following recommendation can be suggested for organizations or offices, leaders and sighted staff members that would be essentially utilized as key inclusive strategies at the workplaces of blind employees. Of all, it is well-noted in this study that blind

employees were high level of “support needs” in their respective workplaces. As such, organizations, offices or institutions:

- ◆ Ought to create access for the provision of blind-specific support services to particularly ensure equal socialization opportunities for blind employees at the workplaces.
- ◆ Should substitute all forms of visual information in different ways for persons who are totally blind. Hence, alternative information support services are vital to access information for those with severe visual impairments in different ways other than vision.
- ◆ Need to establish collaboration with professionals and organizations working in disability fields to share ideas regarding the disability issues and concerns.
- ◆ Have to reconsider and adhere with international and local legal and policy frameworks inherent in disability and inclusion, and they need to show commitment to execute the legal and policy frameworks at the workplaces of blind employees.
- ◆ Need to strive to formulate guidelines for accessibility of visual information and physical spaces, buildings and infrastructures.

In general, it is explained in this study that sighted work colleagues employ exclusionary/discriminatory words, phrases or language during day-to-day communication. In light of this, it can be suggested that sighted working groups: (1) need to employ disability-responsive terms, words or expressions for blind employees, and (2) have to demonstrate inclusive behavior for blind employees Finally, the leaders of organizations and offices in blind employees’ work places shall better to demonstrate inclusive leadership practices which are vital in facilitating holistic inclusion of blind employees.

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