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## **CHALLENGES & PROSPECTS FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT & BLINDNESS ENGAGED IN SELF- EMPLOYED VENTURES**

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### **Introduction**

People with disabilities experience numerous barriers with regard to securing employment, thus, they are more likely to work for low wages, informally and precariously. Besides, some of them are entitled for a disability benefit which is often inadequate to cover their daily expenses (Global Disability Summit, 2018). Economic empowerment can be defined as a way of ensuring income security for people with disabilities to achieve income security, advance economically, enrich themselves through empowerment and autonomy to make economic decisions within and outside the home (Global Disability Summit, 2018). Self-employment is perceived as a viable option for empowering disabled individuals that facilitates achieving a balance between disability status and work life (Kitching, 2014; Pagán, 2009; Adams, et al., 2019). Pagán (2009) indicated the presence of a strong relationship between disability status and self-employment; thus, self-employment rates were higher among people with disabilities compared to those who report no limitation in daily activities (Kitching, 2014; Pagán, 2009; Adams, et al., 2019).

The Global Disability Summit (2018) indicates that obstacles to economic empowerment experienced by people with disabilities can vary depending on the nature of an individual's impairment, their gender, socioeconomic status and the context in which they live. Adams, et al., (2019) further indicate that the decision to enter into self-employment for most disabled individuals were influenced by the 'push' factors such as lack of alternative employment opportunities, rather than the 'pull' factors such as passion or interest in a particular field, or the desire to work for themselves (Kitching, 2014; Adams, et al., 2019).

Past research reveals that the disabled self-employed face significant problems in sustaining the business due to reasons such as consumer discrimination, inadequate training, poor access to information, absence of appropriate business support and challenges in accessing finance (Adams, et al., 2019; Kitching, 2014; Pagán, 2009; Vaziri, Schreiber, Wieching, & Wulf, 2014).

### **Research Problem**

People with visual impairment and blindness (VI&B) represent the majority of the differently abled population in most communities (WHO, 2011), including Sri Lanka where 996,939 persons with VI&B have been reported (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). In order to be sustained, people with VI&B must be economically independent as the mainstream. The research problem emanates from the fact that although self-employment is a viable option for the differently abled, no systematic investigation has been carried out to determine the challenges experienced by persons with VI&B, nor previous evidence of self-employed people with disabilities are available in the Sri Lankan context. Thus, this study contributes to this empirical gap of understanding self-employment and its challenges, experienced by persons with VI&B in Sri Lanka.

### **Objective**

The objective of this study is to explore the extent to which persons with VI&B are engaged in self-employment ventures and to determine the key challenges they run into.

### **Methodology**

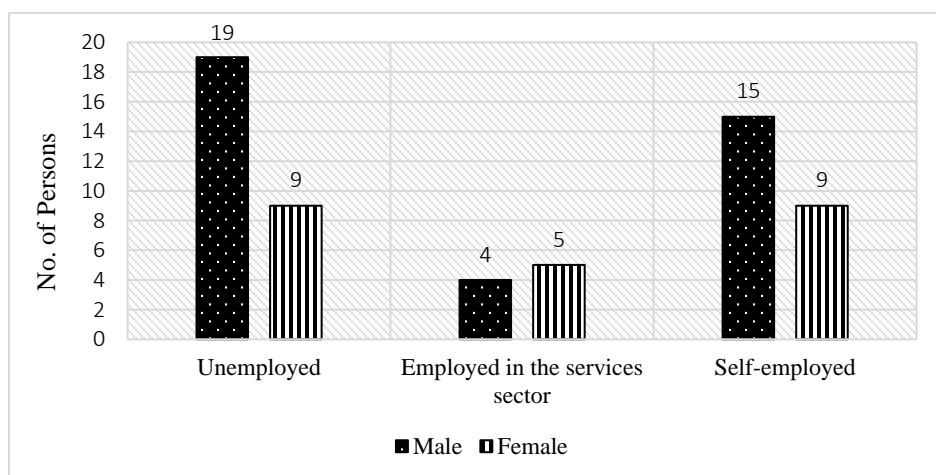
A mixed methodology consisting of qualitative and quantitative approaches were adopted where the study population comprised of 61 persons with VI&B which nearly accounted to the total VI&B population of the Hambantota District. This was accomplished with the involvement of the authors at the ‘White Cane Day’ function of the Hambantota district held on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019. Thus, the sampling methods of selection of ‘subjects’ could be described as a mix of volunteer and convenient sampling. The sample consisted of 24 (28-66 years old) self-employed individuals with VI&B with a generally lower educational background engaging in self-employment as they had no other alternative. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with the sample based on a pre-determined interview protocol which focused on factors related to general well-being, education and employment. Each interview lasted for 20-30 minutes and the proceedings were recorded and transcribed. Using pattern matching and thematic analysis techniques, the data were analyzed to elucidate the key

challenges of self-employment for persons with VI&B. Descriptive statistics were also used to analyze the demographics of the total VI&B population of the Hambanthota district.

## Results and Discussion

### Descriptive Statistics:

Results claim that a majority of 43.6% of the total VI&B population of Hambanthota were totally blind. Further, 35.9% were only able to see light while the rest were only able to see shadows. Genetic issues and neurological disorders have been the main cause for VI&B for the majority amounting to 52.3% of the sample, while others experienced the condition due to accidents and consequences of health conditions such as diabetes, thalassemia and glaucoma. Twenty nine out of these 61 persons were born blind while others became blind later in life. A majority of 47.5% were married and lived with their spouse while 40% were unmarried and 12.5% lived away from spouse. In considering the educational background, 39% were early school drop-outs and 34% managed to pass GCE (O/L); 12% have reached GCE (A/L) level while there were only six graduates. It was significant that the school drop-outs were mainly due to poverty and the fact that the majority (54.3%) had to attend regular schools with no special facilities for VI&B. Approximately 61.5% of the total VI&B population of Hambanthota were Samurdhi recipients while 12 others received a disability benefit of Rs. 5,000 monthly. Four persons were reported as recipients of both the Samurdhi and disability assistance.



Source: Authors' estimation

**Figure 1: Distribution of employment among persons with VI&B**

Figure 1 above illustrates the distribution of employment among persons with VI&B in Hambanthota. The employed VI&B consisted of school teachers and government servants while the self-employed consisted of painters, cultivators, shopkeepers, ayurveda therapists, choir weavers and those who produce incense sticks, bricks, eakle brooms.

### **Economic and Social Challenges:**

In considering the educational background, 39% were early school drop-outs and 34% managed to pass GCE (O/L); 12% have reached GCE (A/L) level while there were only six graduates. It was significant that the school drop-outs were mainly due to poverty and the fact that the majority (54.3%) had to attend regular schools with no special facilities for VI&B. Approximately 61.5% of the total VI&B population of Hambanthota were Samurdhi recipients while 12 others received a disability benefit of Rs. 5,000 monthly. Four persons were reported as recipients of both the Samurdhi and disability assistance.

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The analysis of in-depth interviews revealed five challenges of self-employment experienced by persons with VI&B.

- **Difficulty in obtaining raw materials** – Most of the self-employed persons with VI&B had to travel long distances to obtain raw materials such as choir and fertilizer which made them to use public transport, with its inherent difficulties.
- **Lack of financial support** – In certain instances, persons with VI&B had to cease self-employment ventures or stop business temporarily due to unavailability of financial resources to continue, particularly, working capital. This is attributed to lack or inability to access information and absence of special schemes for providing such financial support.
- **Inadequate infrastructure** – Although most of the respondents within the sample had the required skills, resources and facilities were inadequate, which limited their opportunity for expansion.

- **Consumer discrimination** – Most of the consumers were often reluctant to purchase products manufactured by persons with VI&B assuming they were unhygienic or not of good quality. Thus, in many situations, they were compelled to market their products by other costly means.
- **Inadequate training** - Only 29.4% of the self-employed persons have received training at rehabilitation centers which included candle making, weaving choir ropes/rugs/chairs and ayurveda massage therapy. They had to undergo training on various disciplines which end with a range of skills without mastering a single.

Thus, it is evident that there is a considerable need for additional support for VI&B involved with self-employment. Initiatives aimed at providing financial and non-financial support such as access to concessionary grants and loans providing working capital, technical advice, access to markets, mentoring and training on small businesses would improve their economic independence. Effective job training initiatives could be introduced to overall unemployed/self-employed persons with VI&B aimed at improving quality, encouraging jobs that match their potential and preferences. Thus, availability of effective social protection systems could promote income security of the self-employed VI&B through removal of barriers.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights five challenges of self-employment experienced by persons with VI&B which includes difficulty in obtaining raw materials, lack of financial support, inadequate infrastructure, consumer discrimination and inadequate training. In addition, the study also presented demographic statistics of the VI&B population of the Hambanthota district. Limitations of the study include considering only one district for data collection, thus, as future research, the authors aim to test the findings against a large population. Findings of the study revealed, initiatives aimed at providing financial and non-financial support, effective training and deployment of a disabled-friendly business model would facilitate economic empowerment of self-employed persons with VI&B. Empowering persons with VI&B would enhance their financial independence, thus, enabling them to contribute to the country's economy at large.

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**Keywords:** *Economic empowerment; self-employment; visual impairment and blindness*

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