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# Equal Opportunity Policies in the Formal Sector: Assessing Awareness, Participation and Satisfaction among Employees with Disabilities

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# Introduction

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- Target 8.5 of SDGs seeks to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).
  - Key feature of decent work is the ability of a worker to access equal opportunities and treatment along with prospects for personal development.
  - To provide and promote the same, the Indian legislature has enacted the RPwD Act, 2016, which provides for reasonable accommodation as a right and requires workplaces to have an Equal Opportunity Policy (EOP).
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# Research Questions

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- ❑ What is the awareness level of workers about the equal opportunity policy of their workplace?
  - ❑ Have the workers been consulted in the formation and implementation of the policy?
  - ❑ What is the satisfaction level of workers regarding the content and implementation of the policy?
  - ❑ Have the workers faced any challenges or apprehensions in voicing their concerns about the content or implementation of the policy?
  - ❑ Whether the workers are members of a trade union? If yes, how has the trade union assisted them in the aforementioned matters.
  - ❑ Are there changes required in the Act regarding content and implementation of the policy and workers' participation? If yes, what are the changes required.
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# Hypothesis

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- The authors hypothesized as follows:
    - Workers would have high awareness about the equal opportunity policy at the workplace;
    - Workers would not have been consulted in the formation and implementation of the policy;
    - The satisfaction level about the content and implementation of the policy would be neutral;
    - Challenges faced by workers would depend on individual workplaces.
    - Workers would not be a part of a trade union, but they would be a part of other organisations that would have supported them in understanding the content and implementation of the policy.
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# Methodology

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- Undertook exploratory empirical study via semi structured interviews (qualitative study).
  - Purposive sampling was used due to lower representation of PwDs in the workplace.
  - Persons were invited to participate in the research either directly or through persons engaged in the development/ disability sector.
  - In total 16 interviews were conducted.
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# Findings

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- Most employees (9 out of 15) were aware about the existence of EOPs at their workplaces. 3 employees reported that they were unaware about the existence of a policy. In a few instances (3 out of remaining 6), the employees reported that the workplace did not have a policy in place.
  - Further, employees interviewed had joined the workplace after the policy coming into effect, hence had not been consulted in its formation. However, as will be discussed below, workplaces had certain mechanisms in place to allow consultation during implementation.
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# Findings

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- Regarding the satisfaction level with the EOP, a substantial majority of the interviewees seemed to be satisfied with the EOP and the workplace response to their request for accommodations. Issues were primarily in workplaces without a policy in place.
  - Workplaces had a variety of mechanisms in place for workers to raise their requests and grievances. These ranged from direct communication with their reporting manager, surveys, whatsapp groups and consultation with employees.
  - Only one person reported that they were a part of a trade union. However, several (7) interviewees reported membership with voluntary/ State organised bodies.
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# Contribution to Discourse

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- The high level of reporting regarding existence of EOP unsurprising as these workplaces would be more inclusive. The hiring of PwDs, without a statutory mandate, itself indicates that the workplaces wish to be more diverse. Even in one workplace without a formal policy, the employer had conversations at the time of joining to understand the requirements and put the employee at ease.
  - The more in-depth EOPs existed in traditional private sector employers, such as banks, finance, IT etc.
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# Contribution to Discourse

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- The workplaces had a variety of mechanisms to provide for raising of requests, concerns and grievances. Where the process involved the reporting manager, the manager will have to be aware and receptive to reasonable accommodations or the employee will have to take extra effort to request for accommodations.
  - A few employees mentioned that they were involved in this process but this was in a minority.
  - The more in-depth EOPs existed in traditional private sector employers, such as banks, finance, IT etc. Particularly multinational companies.
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# Contribution to Discourse

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- Where the workplace did not have a policy, employees mentioned often having to spend their own money to get accommodations.
  - Employees also reported a patronizing attitude towards their requests and issues regarding making the management and co-workers understand the accommodations that are required.
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# Contribution to Discourse

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- The lack of trade unionism was also not surprising given that existing scholarship regarding trade union movements has highlighting the waning popularity of trade unions among the working class in India.
  - Prior to joining the workplace, employees primarily rely on organisations working with PwDs to help them find employment. Subsequently, the employees appear to have trust in the workplace to provide them with the accommodations they require to work.
  - PwDs have a strong formal and/or informal organized network among themselves which they also use for job referrals or sharing of information, experiences.
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# Contribution to Discourse

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- A number of interviewees pointed to the need for changes in the recruitment channels and portals, which are not accessible to PwDs. They noted that the potential candidates would not be aware about the job or if the job is available for PwDs. Hence, they are forced to rely on referrals or agencies working for employment of PwDs.
  - Several interviewees also felt the need to make changes in the RPWD Act by (i) making reservation mandatory in the private sector; (ii) bring clarity regarding scope of reasonable accommodation; (iii) having higher penalties for non-compliance with the Act; (iv) upskilling of workers.
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