Article

Emerging Themes on Factors Influencing Career and Employment Decisions: Voices of Individuals with Disabilities from Four Gulf Countries

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Abstract: Understanding the range of factors influencing career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities is crucial for policy makers, businesses, and other stakeholders to support and integrate individuals with disabilities in the economic and social capital of the Arab-Gulf. The purpose of this sttudy was to investigate the factors that influence individuals with disabilities in making decisions about their career and employment. We explore how Arab adults with disabilities explain their career and employment decisions experiences, challenges, and barriers. We interviewed 15 adults with disabilities from four Arab-Gulf countries: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Our findings reveal eight factors that influence individuals with disabilities in their decision-making process about work and their future goals. Two distinct emerging themes were identified as influencing career and employment decisions for individuals with disabilities: individual attributes and environmental factors. Self-determination theory guided our analysis for this research study. The study provided in-depth understanding of the factors that impact employment persistence and individuals with disabilities in the Gulf region. The findings from this base-line study has implications for transition and self-determination. Thus, the study discusses ways to improve the quality of services and supports for individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf and their families.

Keywords: disability; employment; career; decision making; self-determination; Arab

1. Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 reflected a change in attitudes and expectations for individuals with disabilities. The United Nations Convention affirms that all of their rights (i.e., civil, political, social, and economic) are preserved (International Labour Office 2015). Specifically, the Convention supports the rights of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others and supports the accessibility of work for all people (UN 2008). Despite the fact that more than two hundred countries, including many in the Arab-Gulf region, have signed and/or ratified the Convention (UN 2008), the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities continues to be high. In addition, their career decision-making process is complex and continues to be a major challenge in their lives (International Labour Office 2015). Very few studies have investigated the career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf region. The two biggest challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in this region is their lack of awareness of their rights and an actionable legislation to protect those rights (Al Thani 2006).

1.1. Employment of Individuals with Disabilities

Employment data in the Arab world reports higher unemployment rates among individuals with disabilities than individuals without disabilities (ESCWA 2018). These

data, in fact, show that an overall employment rate is lower for women for both with and without disabilities than men (ESCWA 2018, p. 40; Gharaibeh 2009). A female IWD in the Arab-Gulf may find it much harder to find a job than a male IWD. (ESCWA 2018, p. 40; Gharaibeh 2009). Similar results are reported in Western studies which confirms the disadvantages faced by jobseekers with disabilities, particularly women (Hendricks 2010; Seltzer and Krauss 2002; Vogeley et al. 2013; Goldberg et al. 2003). While shunned in many places in society, IWD are more likely to be supported by close family and friends (Kadi 2018; Peter et al. 2018). They receive familial and emotional support from their social circle with mothers having the most influence on their career and employment decisions, followed by fathers and friends (Kadi 2018; Peter et al. 2018). However, Abusukkar (2019) reports opposing information; he observed that family members and the broader society in Saudi Arabia did not support the employment of individuals with disabilities, which negatively impacted their career decisions.

Negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities are still prevalent in the Arab-Gulf countries and broader Arab region. Despite claims saying otherwise (Al Tarawneh 2016; Kadi 2018; Mansour 2009; Peter et al. 2018), the implications suggest that individuals with disabilities have low productivity and work performance, frequent absences, poor communication, and an inability to take on additional responsibilities (Al Tarawneh 2016; Ghaly 2010; Mansour 2009). It is common to find individuals with disabilities in the Arab gulf region employed in jobs where career progression is limited or altogether kept out of the workforce (Al Tarawneh 2016; Mansour 2009) and around the world (Loja et al. 2013; Ozawa et al. 2016; Yardimci and Bezmez 2018). It is reported that individuals with disabilities are faced with a double-edged sword; they not only face the barriers related to their own disabilities, but also the discriminatory disablement of society's understandings of disability (Azhar 2014; Alshammari 2019). In addition to these issues, Abusukkar (2019), Kadi (2018), and Morgan (2021) reported poor work environments and a lack of a clear reason around support for employment for individuals with disabilities. This extends beyond the Arab-Gulf and the Arab countries, as individuals with disabilities in many of these experience environmental obstacles which affect physical access to employment (International Labour Office 2015).

When unemployed individuals with disabilities have low self-expectations about their ability to find a job, they may give up all together on the idea of employment (Skills and Employability Department 2007). Employed individuals with disabilities often feel dissatisfied in the work they do and in the organizations where they work. They have mixed feelings about employment and their place of employment, whether in a public or private establishments (Villanueva-Flores et al. 2014). National policies exist to support the employment of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf and broader Arab region in government and private institutions (Bahrain Legislation and Legal 2006; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Labour 2006; Kuwaiti Society for the Guardians of Disabled 2010; Al Meezan 2004; Oman Ministry of Social Development 2008; UAE 2019). For instance, there are quotes for employing individuals with disabilities. However, they are not consistently enforced, nor are companies that fail to meet them held accountable (Al-Hendawi et al. 2017; Azhar 2014; Kadi 2018; Morgan 2021). These employment quotas range from two to four percent with varying applicability to public or private sectors and minimum number of employees per employer (International Labour Office 2019). While individuals with disabilities on the one hand are striving to be productive and engaged in elements of society, they receive lip service in terms of government support. This lack of normalization of their status leads many to consider the employment of individuals with disabilities as a corporate responsibility rather than being inclusive in their approach. As a result, individuals with disabilities are unable to find work they want to do but instead fill jobs they are given because they fulfill a social need.

1.2. The Study and Its Framework

The authors sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf as they made decisions about future employment. Our work was guided by the self-determination theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 2008) as well as the work carried out by Peter et al. (2018) on self-determination to determine the degree to which self-determination can overcome employment obstacles in Saudi Arabia. These frameworks were used to guide the analysis of qualitative data. We wanted to understand the employment experiences and decision-making process of individuals with disabilities as they made decisions about career goals. The intention was to uncover those more nuanced perspectives about discrimination, belief, rights, and challenges, and how they influence career decisions and employment experiences of individuals with disabilities. Using the SDT model we could frame those intentions based on the types of drives (i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic). Both are powerful forces in shaping individuals with disabilities identities and behaviors in the way they respond to the challenges in their employment (Deci and Ryan 2008). Thus, in the analysis of the factors influencing individuals with disabilities' employment and career decisions in the Arab-Gulf, one could differentiate between factors based on intrinsic drives within the self (e.g., disability specific challenges, faith) and those based on extrinsic drives (e.g., social network, work environment, and government policy and others). SDT also differentiates between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Deci and Ryan 2008). Individuals with disabilities often struggle with meeting their need for autonomy, as many decisions are made on their behalf. Moreover, as their disability and contextual factors may interfere with their need for competence, their efforts to master tasks and develop their knowledge may be hampered (Ackerman 2020). We mainly investigated the following two questions: (1) What factors have influenced the career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf region? (2) How do these factors impact on the decisions that individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf region make about their future?

2. Method

2.1. Process

The study was exploratory, using semi-structured interview questions, drawing upon questions and themes from previous research (Kasnitz 2001; Thoma et al. 2016) and guidance from stakeholders and advocates for IWD advising the project. The interview questions elicited responses based on seven domains. The domains included background, problem solving, decision making, disability and opportunities, activities, and barriers. In line with approved Institutional Review Board protocol, potential participants were contacted by phone. The study informed the participants of the potential risks and confidentiality of the information, and informed consent was sought. Participants were assured that participation in the study was voluntary as they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. We conducted the interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell and Poth 2018) which allows for gathering common information and follow-up questions for clarification, as well as obtaining as much detail as possible from participants (Seidman 2019). The duration of the interviews ranged from one to two hours. Prior to the first interview, a pre-interview talk was performed through a phone. Participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions to help organize their response and serve to provide those with intellectual disabilities additional time to process information and prepare for the interview.

The semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell and Poth 2018) allowed us to gather common information through main interview questions and follow-up questions, as well as to obtain as much details as possible from participants (Seidman 2019). The interview questions were developed from the literature about career and employment decisions for individuals with disabilities (Table 1). In Qatar, we used in-person interviews with participants, as the interviewers live in Qatar. One interview was held with a participant with his father's presence. For participants from Kuwait and Oman, we offered them

the opportunity to participate in the interviews by phone or video conferencing through any platform that is convenient to them. All chose to participate either by WhatsApp phone call or video call from their homes. All males chose video calls while the two females from Kuwait and Oman chose a phone call. The interviews were conducted in their respective Arabic Dialect and audio recorded with the permission of the participants. They were later transcribed verbatim and then translated to English for analysis and publishing purposes. The study obtained qualitative information and analyzed, classified and described this information. The data were analyzed using an inductive approach. This allowed for the pattern of experiences for individuals with disability to be identified (Brantlinger et al. 2005).

Table 1. Sample interview questions adapted from the respective sources.

Question Category	Interview Question (When Participant Is Not Able to Respond Verbally, Questions Are Slightly Amended to Ask the Accompanying Person to Respond on Behalf of the Participant.)	Source/Citation
Background	Could you tell me about yourself and how your background has impacted you and your efforts to accomplish your personal goals? What are the factors impacting your efforts to accomplish the goals you want to achieve?	(Achola and Greene 2016; Banks 2017; Ford 2012; Shogren 2011; Thoma et al. 2016)
Problem Solving	Could you tell me about a significant challenge that you may have had as you were growing up or one that you may have had recently?	(NTACT 2017; Shogren 2011; Thoma et al. 2016; Wehmeyer and Shogren 2017)
Decision Making	What factors influenced you when making decisions about your future (family, work, further education, etc.)?	(NTACT 2017; Shogren 2011; Thoma et al. 2016; Wehmeyer and Shogren 2017)
Disability and Opportunities	Do you think that your disability made a difference in the educational opportunities you had? Do you think your disability makes a difference in the opportunites you will have in the future?	(Achola and Greene 2016; Banks 2017; Griffin 2011; Mazzotti et al. 2016; Shogren and Ward 2018)
Activities	Tell me about your educational experiences. How did you choose your school, courses and extracurricular activities? What influenced your decisions about classes and/or participation in extracurricular activities?	(Achola and Greene 2016; Griffin 2011; Martin and Williams-Diehm 2013; NTACT 2017; Shogren 2011; Thoma et al. 2016; Shogren and Ward 2018; Wehmeyer and Shogren 2017; Wehmeyer and Webb 2011)
Barriers	Do you see any barriers to getting what you want for your adult life? What are they? Are there things you can think of to do to overcome those barriers?	(Ford 2012; Griffin 2011; Shogren 2011; Thoma et al. 2016; Trainor et al. 2020; Trainor et al. 2012)

2.2. Participants

A sample of 15 individuals with disabilities from four Arab-Gulf countries (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia) took part in this study (three women and twelve men). The number of participants met the recommendations for sample size in qualitative studies (Huber and Whelan 1999). The mean age of the 15 participants was 34 years. Participants' disabilities ranged from those with visual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, quadriplegia, cerebral palsy, and other physical disabilities. All participants completed a high school or university degree. Details of participants' characteristics are provided in Table 2, with pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) used throughout this paper to protect anonymity. The participants were reached by employing the snowball technique (Naderifar et al. 2017) through friends, connections, and social media profiles (Larkin et al. 2021).

Table 2. Characteristics of participants at the point of interview.

Identity (Disability)	Age	Gender/Nationality	Social Status	Highest Education Level	Employment Status
Participant 1 (Visual impairment)	32	M/ Qatari	Single	Higher education degree	Governance department
Participant 2 (Visual impairment)	44	F/ Qatari	Single	Higher education degree	Governance department
Participant 3 (Autism spectrum disorder)	20	M/ Qatari	Single	Secondary level	Family business
Participant 4 (Quadriplegic due to traffic accident)	39	M/ Kuwaiti	Married	High school	Retired after accident
Participant 5 (Physical disability)	29	M/ Omani	Single	Diploma from a technical college	Call center employee in a telecommunications company
Participant 6 (Physical disability)	26	M/ Kuwaiti	single	High school	National para-athlete
Participant 7 (Visual impairment)	33	F/ Omani	Single	Bachelor degree in Translation Studies	Translator and media specialist
Participant 8 (Physical disability)	36	M/ Qatari	Married	Bachelor degree in Business	Athletes' relations representative
Participant 9 (Visual impairment)	29	M/ Qatari	Single	Undergraduate student	Former national para-athlete for 5 years
Participant 10 (Visual impairment)	36	F/ Saudi	Single	Master degree in Education	English teacher in a local school for the visually-impaired
Participant 11 (Quadriplegic)	41	M/ Kuwaiti	Married	High school	Para-athlete at a disability club
Participant 12 (physical and visual disability)	29	M/ Qatari	Single	Bachelor degree	Accessibility Specialist at a local university
Participant 13 (Visual impairment)	45	M/ Omani	Single	Secondary level	Employee at a call center
Participant 14 (Physical disability)	38	M/ Omani	Single	High school	Employee at a call center
Participant 15 (Cerebral palsy)	32	M/ Omani	Married	Bachelor degree	Tax inspector

2.3. Inductive Data Analysis

We began data collection by systematically coding (word, phrase, groups of words) and then creating categorizing the ideas from the interview transcripts to construct relationships and obtain emergent themes. Inductive analysis was used where categories, patterns and themes emerged from the data. Rodwell (1998) describes unitizing as the process of identifying the "smallest piece of information that can be understood by someone with minimal knowledge or experience with the phenomena under investigation" (Rodwell 1998, p. 155). We "thought comparatively" (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to identify similarities and differences across the data according to their general or specific characteristics or attributes of a category. Our intent was to develop a framework emerging from the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). We thus categorized the data into emerging themes, an approach that allowed our research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data (Thomas 2006).

2.4. Trustworthiness and Credibility

Triangulation during three rounds of coding has occurred with the process of having multiple coders each working independently during each of the three rounds of coding (Creswell and Poth 2018). Two authors hold a Ph.D. and are faculty in higher education; one is from a university in the Gulf region and the other professor is from a university in the United States. The other two authors were graduate students in a university in the Gulf. Authors have various degrees of research experience with post-secondary transition-related topics and are interested in the lives of individuals with disabilities beyond their specialization in (special) education. The research team of four was diverse with various degrees of experience. The team has varying degrees of knowledge related to the topic including self-determination, culturally responsive practices, the framework, and qualitative research. This diversity of knowledge and skills adds further credibility to the findings of the study, as they do not hold similar world-views or experiences. Separate discussions were held via email, web conference, and in-person to cascade the direction and conduct separate discussions as well. Discussions involved the implications of the factors on the experiences of the individuals with disabilities interviewed (Annamma et al. 2018). As for the interviews, fidelity was established through note takers, and stakeholder checks were conducted by verbally summarizing the discussion at the end of interviews. Study procedures were approved by the university institutional review board in the Gulf which reviews all research protocols that involve human participants. Together, these procedures ensured that our interviews resulted in high-quality data to answer our research questions and understand the impact of the various factors on the employment and career decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Gulf.

3. Results

3.1. Factors Influencing Employment and Career Decisions

Three major themes emerged in the process of identifying the influencing factors in the career decisions: disability challenges, faith, and service to other individuals with disabilities. First, we wanted to underline how self-determination operated as an overarching theme that was a major driver for individuals with disabilities seeking employment, careers, and quality of life.

3.2. Self-Determination

The interviews revealed that some participants had engaged in volitional actions in their self-agency to achieve a higher quality of life. Their attitudes and behaviors have helped them not only to overcome the challenges brought about by their disabilities but also those brought by the misconceptions that people hold about disabilities. Take the anecdote shared by Participant 12, for instance:

> *The other reason is to prove to people that they are wrong about me. I faced bullying and some say that because I have special needs, I need to stay home rather than work. I want to prove them wrong. Even my family did not believe that I can graduate from college. But I did it and proved them wrong.*

Breaking people's stereotypes towards IWD appeared to be one way in which individuals with disabilities are motivated to gain employment and work. Moreover, Participant 10 wanted to show her colleagues that she can still do a lot of things, describing herself as self-reliant and independent:

> *My colleagues at work know who they are dealing with . . . We meet them every day and prove to them that we can do lots of things. We can walk and move without help. You don't have to stand up and walk me or help me. I can prepare my tea and coffee.*

Participant 8 had met with an accident that caused him to have a physical disability. The event had a significant impact on how he feels, and he considers himself a better person than before. He believes that after his disability, he gained purpose and goals to achieve. He had demonstrated some dispositions aligning with those of self-determined behaviors

and they were key in overcoming the barriers he faced in school and at work. For instance, he was able to complete his undergraduate study and has been able to set goals for himself, to achieve and strive to become better version of himself:

> *I now want to achieve goals, and want to prove to society and family that I am like I was before or maybe better . . . Thank Allah I proved to them that I am truly better than before. Before, I was working as an operator in a company . . . Now, I appear on newspapers, TV channels, and meet ministers.*

3.3. Emerging Themes of Intrinsic Factors

Disability-specific challenges. A handful of participants mentioned that they had sought their respective government's help in gaining employment, recounted that some of the jobs offered were unsuitable for individuals with disabilities. Participant 3 was among this group who was not able to find a suitable job with his disability-specific challenges
This quote is by the father of a Participant 3, an individual with autism.

> *Currently, he finished the secondary school, we applied for him to the Ministry of administrative development (where they could find a job for him), a group of jobs came up, but most were not suitable and would not fit for his specific disability.*

Similarly, Participant 1 foreseeing the difficulties of being a student with visual impairment stated:

> *The conditions of blindness and studying abroad scared me, and I was offered a Teaching Assistant position along with a group of young people, to complete our studies abroad and then return back home. I didn't go through such experience before and I was afraid to go forward with it.*

An academic scholarship with the security of employment during and after one's studies may be a typical university student's dream. However, the case above sheds light on the impact the concomitant challenges of a disability have on the career decisions for individuals with disabilities. Meeting their needs of being disabled is often foremost in their endeavors.

3.4. Believing in God (Allah): Islam

Islam is the official religion in the Arab Gulf. Gulf countries tend to be conservative and its Islamic identity is apparent in their societies and among Muslims. We found similar beliefs and identify among the participants we interviewed in this study. They identified themselves as Muslims and reported that Islam influenced their career and employment decisions.

Acceptance as part of faith. Career outcomes and employment decisions serve to remind individuals with disabilities that "belief in God will provide for everyone what they deserve." The individuals with disabilities believe that with effort and prayers, the final outcomes of their endeavors—including career and employment decisions—rest in the hands of God. Participant 7, said:

> *After having the disability, I can say faith is the first thing that kept me going.*

Participant 2 added more clarity:

> *Any person who does not accept oneself can be problematic. Our condition must be accepted. If one does not accept oneself, he enters a struggle with the self and is alienated from the community, then the onset of depression, frustration . . . . . . [and] suicide. For this, the beginning of everything is faith in Allah.*

Participants recognized that it is their duty to have faith in God. They also acknowledged that while they have career ambitions, only God decides when the timing is right for them to be fulfilled, as claimed by Participant 1:

> *Ambition exists for everyone to reach the highest professional levels, when they are fulfilled, it is up to Allah Almighty . . . . Success comes from Allah. Allah made things easy for me so that I chose the right choice.*

Confidence as part of faith. Participants felt that their strength and self-confidence appears to come as a requisite of this confidence in God.

Self-confidence, where does self-confidence come from? Confidence is an extended task of faith in Allah.

Participant 2 believed that her self-confidence was derived from her faith in God which she applies to the decisions she made on her career and employment. She also believes that individuals with disabilities need to be able communicating with others about their capabilities.

A person has to have a strong relation with Allah, and have faith and believe in Allah ability. One's relationship with Allah should be perennial, one's self-confidence is Allah given and gives others the confidence in believing.

We found that blind fatalism and strong belief in God draws one to accept in one predicament at work or what opportunities individuals with disabilities receive.

Knowledge and skill application. Participants shared that human resource development helped them find better jobs and make appropriate employment decisions. They specified that the provision of special education and disability support services helped them with aspirations for better job prospects and the desire to apply knowledge and skills.

Participant 7 shared the imperative of her choice of a university major that suited her capabilities.

This is my target, first to make sure that the university major suits what I know and what I can do, and to then if I can achieve the objectives.

Participant 1 built on the narrative describing how choice of an academic major plays a role in employment and career trajectory. We also understood that perceived inclusivity of the chosen field is aligned with the choice the respondents takes:

So, I chose to join the company that I can do work within my major . . . a job suitable for my abilities and my degree and training.

Participant 14 provided an insight in how sewing was part of his education and training.

They teach us sewing as a part of our occupational training, and it was a swing of dishdasha. And the last year was academic studying with sewing and thanks to Allah I graduated. Being a college graduate I looked for a job, and you know, the difficulty was to find a job was tremendous given I have a physical disability. So I asked help for social allowance and I stayed without work for 10 years. And thanks to Allah, I find a job working for a global clothing company.

Participant 15 claimed:

I love my job very much it is what I was trained to do.

The analysis of responses demonstrated how education and human resource development has perpetually influenced the career and employment decisions for individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf in various ways. While some participants found jobs in areas for which they were trained, others sacrificed many years idling until they found the ideal job in their field. Much of this occurred because they were provided with special education and disability support services, along with their individual self-determination and aspirations for better job prospects and the desire to apply knowledge and skills.

3.5. Service to Other Individuals with Disabilities

The "will" to give back and serve the special needs community is a major force in determining the career path for some of the participants. Participant 2 was weighing between three job offers only to realize very quickly that her calling was to help people like her.

I told people at the Ministry, there are many people who can provide their knowledge and expertise to those who have the same disabilities but I am interested in serving the "Blinds," they need people like me. How many people can help and understand them. [It's] blind people like me who can understand their needs. I want to work with them.

I accepted the job saying that a new position would be a positive thing for me and who would understand more those with special needs than people with those needs?

Participant 12 decided to focus on the positives of teaching and guiding younger individuals with disabilities while sacrificing a career in law.

I had a job while I was preparing my master's degree. I had to study and teach at the same time. They expected that when we graduate, some of us will come back to the school to work as teachers, so they accepted me instantly.

Additionally, the text that I will be translating will give me the feeling that I did something that people can use. It will also help blind people to get access to information and techniques. That's why I chose this major [English language].

Participant 11 said:

My job ambition is to work in something that serves people with disabilities in wheelchairs or [who have] quadriplegia. Even if I create my own business I would want to help them.

3.6. Emerging Themes of Extrinsic Factors

3.6.1. Education and Capability Development

Special education and disability support **services**. Participant 13 gave a glimpse into the limited employment opportunities that individuals with disabilities had when they were previously not able to study in universities and attain degrees due to a lack of disability support services.

Most people with visual disabilities were employed in call centers and some work as a Muezzin[1] or as an Imam[2]. Nowadays there are people with visual disability who have a university education and some them are teachers because we have institutions now that support our study and subsequently job placement.

Participant 6 said:

In PE classes, we were allowed to play some appropriate sports . . . like basketball and tennis; this was my turning point. We played in the school championship and I won first place. Therefore, a teacher in the school advised me to join the sports club. I stopped my high school . . . because I was busy with sports, so it was difficult for me to [manage] two things, studying and sports. Thereby, I put my attention more in sports because and the passion I had for it.

Better job prospects. Participant 11 employment options were limited as his high school certificate did not qualify him for a good job:

That is why I did not have a job even if I want to. My certificate will not qualify me for a good job. Let's be reasonable, what job will I find! You talk about a disabled person who has a secondary school certificate (high school diploma).

Participant 9 said:

The thing is that I don't want to be put in a place like archives department. I am trying to obtain a degree to work in an appropriate position. I don't think there is a person in Doha who works in such a position, so I don't know if there will be any obstacles.

Further Participant 5 said,

I entered Science track but my interests were in the arts . . . there were many difficulties and options were limited for me of course, because of my condition, I cannot enter any specialization, so I entered computer engineering, which involves desktop work and less laboratories. Other engineering specializations need physical movement in labs and on engineering sites, so they were difficult for me to enter.

3.6.2. Government Services

Participant 6 portrayed a positive view of such government service:

Even if you want to be employed, you do not need to be on the wait to be short listed. You just take your certificate to the special needs authority and they employ you. They usually ask you where you desire to work, and according to your credentials they choose the position that best suits you.

However, others may have a slightly different view of the process, especially in having the intended outcome:

When I graduated, the Ministry of Development helped me find a suitable job. They provided me with a letter to manpower so that they find me a suitable job quickly. But I have not received any response. I was constantly searching for a job. They promised me but nothing tangible came up. I stayed for almost five years at home after graduating.

Participant 15, expected that individuals with disabilities get special privileges because of their condition:

The government were not interested in people with disabilities. There were no facilities in getting a job. Even if you don't have a secondary school certificate, they should employ you in a comfortable place like an office. They should not employ you in a place that require a hard place not appropriate for individuals with disabilities.

For most, if not all Arab-Gulf countries, the government mandates that an allowance be given to an unemployed individual with a disability as a form of social welfare, which has resulted in contrasting perspectives and engagement across the Arab-Gulf. Participant 4 shed some light on government policy which he deeply appreciates:

Medical retirement was compulsory because I can't carry a weapon and wear the uniform; the two required things for my job. I swear the government does all it can do. It is the best government in the world for people with disabilities . . . I say it out loud.

This participant added that there is also allowance for the caregiver and a transport allowance to hire a driver for the individual with a disability. It appeared that by extension of services and support the disability benefits take effects upon a medical retirement. For individuals with disabilities without a pension, the allowance is increased so that they would be compensated fairly.

That said, peeling into this layer of gratitude revealed how invaluable the wellbeing and comfort disability benefits are to the participants. Such was the case for Participant 9:

To be frank, I feel comfortable with this situation. I feel that if I walk again, I must start everything from the beginning again, and deal with the world again from the beginning. The second reason is that I do not want to lose the accommodations and the resources that they avail for us. Having no disability, I will not receive any of the benefits.

Participant 9 continued:

I am not working now, thanks to Allah the money I receive is enough for me as a single person . . . I spend my money on myself, and I save the rest. Every two years there is a wheelchair provided for me from the government upon my request, with special options. For others, the amount may be too small to support their lifestyle and their own family. So, they forgo the subvention, agree to work in a job that pays more than the subvention even though they are still considered underpaid based on their degree qualifications.

Participant 13's viewpoint below supports this career and employment decision, to look for employment to be able to support loved ones:

Some people with visual disabilities were getting subventions from the country . . . I did not get that money as I have a job. Some of my friends had to sign papers that they their employment was below their qualifications and that they should not [claim] additional benefits . . . I have a house now and a family and children. I used to live in my parents' house but not anymore.

Independence is a priority for some, regardless of the income. This means not relying on their loved ones nor state welfare to sustain themselves.

All what I wanted is to have a job because we faced financial problems at home. To be honest, all what I wanted is to have a job and depend on myself rather than my family. Alhamdulillah [All praises be to Allah], I have a job now in the government sector.

In summary, these career and employment decisions were impacted by the provision of special education and disability support services; the aspirations for better job prospects; the desire to apply knowledge and skills; the desired governmental employment support; and the effects of the disability benefit systems.

3.6.3. Social Network

Making big decisions about their careers or going through challenging career pathways did not necessarily mean that individuals with disabilities had to do it alone. At least half of the participants shared with us the support and encouragement they received from their social network. Many people in their social network supported them to remain steadfast in their career decisions. A few participants benefited from similar past experiences when a family member with a disability had gone through similar experiences. In particular, individuals with disabilities reported that they relied heavily on their parents who were familiar with how they could provide support. Furthermore, these participants also learned from the employment choices that their family member with disability had made which helped them make informed employment decisions. Participant 9 said:

If I didn't talk with my mother, and hear her prayers, I feel that I didn't complete my day, I would think that something was wrong. These are the most important things in my life that make me feel I can achieve and reach to places that I never could have reached.

Participant 9 continued referring to his appreciation to people in his social network that supported him in finding a job that suits his needs:

He said to me, come and give it a try, you fit that place, you can achieve success and represent your nation . . . They are the first ones who encouraged me, and they said that that being in sports is virtuous. It is up to you; you can do what makes you feel comfortable.

Participant 6 was encouraged by the coach who worked at the country's disability sports club. Participant 6 excelled in local level athletics tournaments. His sporting career began when he joined the club in 2009, with the support of his family members as well:

[My family members] took me to the club in my first days to see how everything is going, and whether I am comfortable in the place or not. They helped me become independent.

Participant 6 further shared:

Especially now after they knew who I am and what I achieved, so many people were coming to greet me. They were saying things no one can expect to hear. They said I am champion, "you are not disabled but, we are, because we are the ones who are inactive doing nothing. You raised the Kuwaiti flag! . . . . People were coming with their kids to take pictures with me. Those people and fans were a big motivation for me and likewise to people with disabilities, and people now are more aware than ever about our situation.

On the other hand, in the absence of acquiring support from social circles isolation—whether by choice or imposed—was claimed to leave participants with limited career or employment decisions to make and thus, unemployed. Participant 13 compared his experience to others he knew from his time going to school in Bahrain in the 1990s:

I describe my personality as normal. Alhamdullilah [I] am a social person. I love to be with people. I am not isolated because isolation will has challenges. I remember people with visual disabilities in Bahrain were alienated from the rest of society in the 1990s to Bahrain now, [people with disabilities] have jobs today.

Merely observing the consequences of IWD alienation steered Participant 13 in ways that made him more social and active self-determining his own economic and social outcome.

3.6.4. Employers and the Work Environment

Employment and training. Support from supervisor(s) and cooperation from colleagues were also reported to result in success at work. Participant 8 received support he received from his employer that made it easy for him to make career decisions:

They allowed me to continue as a trainee with them ... The internship period was supposed to be two years, after that, [they] can terminate my contract because I will not be qualified anymore. However, they really supported me, they even brought me the contract while I was on bed and I signed the renewal, and I received the salary. They also said to me go study abroad, we don't have any problem.

On the contrary, few participants spoke of challenges to being employed despite demonstrating passion and capability. These ranged from not hearing back from employers in the field of interest to employers providing a token of possible hiring.

They told me that they want people with disabilities so that they stay in the job, the job offers a low salary and that the person with disabilities will be satisfied with the wages. I heard this more than three times in job interviews. They mentioned it to me directly. I left the interview and didn't complete the interview. The qualification for hiring required high school graduates low and offered about 325 Omani Riyals per month.

Participant 6 was employed, regardless of his level of involvement in his sport.

There is a salary for para-professionals and rewards given whether for achievement or internal rewards from the club. We also have Ramadan courses that are held in the club and during championship tournament. They are always honoring winners, so thanks to Allah they are not negligent in this matter.

3.7. Good/Poor Work Environment

Participant 1 shared with us what happened after his first interview:

Then there was a call. They told me that you passed the first interview and you have a second interview with the service department and with the IT to see what your needs are. At that time, it was impossible for that kind of service and attention to be available anywhere else.

Participant 12—an accessibility specialist, reported that his work revolved around providing services to university students with special needs. This position provided accessible services to students to achieve increased access to the university coursework— He shared with us his frustrations about his experience:

I don't like my job because my job depends on other units so if I apply for something I have to wait for approval or rejection, and they take a long time ... So how would I improve myself and the university if there is no cooperation? So, the main problem is that our unit can't be effective with all the bureaucratic barriers. When it reaches those who are assigned for the job, they delay the reply or ask for unreasonable things ... You asked me how my job is. I would say it is comfortable but if I find another job, I will go for it.

Many felt there was a level of discrimination towards individuals with disabilities or lack of cooperation from those who are closely working with individuals with disabilities that did not only affect the participants morale but also limited their career progression. Participant 15 said the following:

The first company I worked at was for seven years. I felt discrimination there. I didn't get any promotions. I don't know how they look at me though I was a hard-working person. I asked for a promotion, but I didn't have a chance. I got promoted in the governmental sector once and due to the economic situation in Oman [that followed after], promotion had to stop.

Government Policies

Efficacy and Enforcement of Disability Quotas. To the chagrin of many individuals with disabilities who are job applicants, offering low salaries and low-skilled jobs are how some employers have gone about to minimally meet the requirements of the disability employment quota. Government policies regarding the disability quota are well intentioned but experiences such as that of Participant 1 below may suggest how it can be to benefit individuals with disabilities.

> *The jobs offered to me are not appropriate, [it] only to cover 2% of the workforce for the handicapped imposed by government. The nature of the work is not suitable like a phone operator, a receptionist, etc. I rejected those positions; my ambition is greater.*

Retirement pension. Receiving a retirement pension has incentivized individuals with disabilities to stay employed for a specific minimum number of years in a chosen field. The allowance that some individuals with disabilities receive is incomparable to a typical job salary. Participant 11 said:

> *I am injured now, and you know, if I leave the field of sports, I won't have a retirement salary. The compensation salary is not like a salary for a job. Up till today, we have not signed an agreement . . . . . . There have been three months with no payments.*

4. Discussion

In this study, we attempted to explore the range of factors that influence career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf region. Our study used a general inductive approach to data analysis (Thomas 2006) and coding, as adapted from Creswell (2002, p. 266, Figure 9.4, as cited in Thomas 2006, p. 242). Our proposed model (see Table 3) organized the findings to answer our research questions. The study participants were six Qataris, five Omanis, three Kuwaitis, and one Saudi.

Table 3. Emerging themes of factors influencing individuals with disabilities in the Gulf.

Drive/Motives		Emerging Themes of Factors	Sub-Factors
Intrinsic	Individual	Disability	Self-determination Disability-specific challenges
		Faith/Islam	Acceptance as part of faith Confidence as part of faith
		Service to other individuals with disabilities	-
Extrinsic	Environmental	Employers and the work environment	Employment and training Good/poor work environment Prejudice against individuals with disabilities
		Government policies	Efficacy and enforcement of disability quota
		Education and capability development	Special education and disability support services Better job prospects Knowledge and skill application
		Social network	
		Government services	Varying employment support Effects of disability benefit systems
		Retirement pension	-

To recap, our two research questions were (a) What factors have influenced the career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Gulf region? and (b) How do these factors impact on the decisions that individuals with disabilities in the Gulf region make about their future? The questions were designed to gain a better understanding of how the Gulf governments, businesses, and societies can better promote the economic

participation of individuals with disabilities. We found a total of eight factors that influenced career and employment decisions of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf. We categorized these results into emerging themes that reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. In particular, these included *individual attributes, social network, employers and the work environment, and government policies*.

We identified intrinsic and extrinsic drives that influenced participants' employment and career decisions. In the analysis of intrinsic factors, we incorporated personal attributes, disability-specific challenges, faith, service to others and knowledge and skills services. For extrinsic factors, we examined social network, work environment, and government policies. While the interview questions revolved around pre-conceptualized themes, emergent themes appeared and shed light on important theoretical and practical implications.

We will start the discussion with these themes (pre-conceptualized) and emergent themes within the intrinsic drives within the self. Participants were self-determined, willing to show they will produce and put forth effort even against all odds. They want to show others and ones close to them their abilities. More interestingly, one participant, whose disability was acquired later in life, reported becoming a better person with a sense of purpose and goals in life.

Although with determination and will, participants did acquire jobs within government agencies (non-private). None had jobs at private companies. These companies may have shunned participants due to a sense that individuals with disabilities may disrupt the flow and slow an overly competitive environment. Even with government support, the jobs they were offered were not in line with their disabilities or with their training. They felt the offered jobs limited their ability to perform well on the job. Even with government support, the jobs they were offered was not in array with their disabilities and felt they limited them to carry on with their tasks. Some had fears of being able to take these challenges because not being able to perform or fearing of the unknown.

Participants wanted to provide to their own organizations or places of work and help to support other individuals with disabilities that may have had similar experiences. Many felt they were able to meet their organization's expectations because of their training and education and their desire to help others. Significantly, faith was reported as important to career and employment decisions across all of the respondents; any of the respondents had a sense of fatalism that whatever destiny or career course they take it was God's will for them to succeed. Many also felt that much of their confidence and inner drive comes from the goodness of God. Many believed Islam is the way that demonstrates God's will, and that Islam transcends all of the barriers and job challenges one will face.

Self-determination theory differentiates between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation (Deci and Ryan 2008). Individuals with disabilities may struggle to reach autonomy but can often face social, cultural, and physical limitations. There are however a number of external environmental, contextual, and social drives that can support the career goals of people with disabilities. We found several key themes based on extrinsic drives consistent with SDT. Participants reported struggling with meeting their need for autonomy, as many decisions were made on their behalf that impacted their employment decisions and the outcomes of such decisions. The first overarching theme emerged was human resource development.

The participants reported that they received employment services and placements that align with their disability but not in a career of choice. The disability support services provided at the university level provided opportunities to participate in university programs and in some cases job placement. Through disability support services in higher education, individuals with disabilities began enrolling into colleges and universities to meet their career aspirations. They had a desire for better job prospects upon graduation availability of disability support services in higher education; individuals with disabilities began enrolling into colleges and universities to meet their career aspirations. The availability of disability support services in higher education encouraged individuals with disabilities to enroll in colleges and universities to meet their career aspirations. They had a desire

for better job prospects upon graduation. However, many still received public supports (employment in the public sector). Participants felt there was a mismatch between their training and skills with the jobs they got. For instance, one of the participants mentioned how disabilities limited their employment in call centers. Their training and skills made them over-qualified for their occupational roles.

Government disability support was limited and sometimes not enough for those who had to support family members. What came to light from these participants is that even with support from the government, whether in training or job placement offices, many of the participants where not satisfied with their job placements. It appears that while many of the organizations and government agencies do find jobs for individuals with disabilities, they do so not based on the abilities of the candidates but to satisfy quotas required by government. It also appears that individuals with disabilities do not seek occupational "glory" or occupational progression and success, but that they want to show to their close ones and people in general that they can do it what ever the obstacles. Others also consider government support as a given privilege and many in the Arab Gulf appreciate claiming that their governments are the best in the world to support individuals with disabilities.

There are limitations to this study (particularly in the sample of the IWD). The sample of IWD did not fulfill the spectrum of people with disabilities. Our results apply to our sample in which the average age of the interviewees was 34 years. Also, there were only 3 females and 12 males, which makes it hard to interpret whether there are some issues more relevant for females or males. Our participants' educational backgrounds ranged from high school to graduate degrees, which raises the questions about additional barriers that might be faced by individuals with disabilities who had only a basic education. First, despite using a purposeful criterion sampling process (Larkin et al. 2021) and snowball technique (Naderifar et al. 2017), we were unable to interview any IWD from Bahrain and UAE. The snowball effect method may have led to finding participants with similar characteristics, reducing the diversity of the sample as compared to random sampling. This may explain why many of the participants were employed and had similar experiences.

The experiences of individuals with disabilities on their career decisions and employment outcomes in the Arab-Gulf region still remains limited at the point of this study. Second, our study sample included participants who were employed at the point of interview—only two were unemployed (one actively job-seeking and another retired after being disabled). It is imperative to note that it is not our intention to portray that the majority of individuals with disabilities as being employed does help us gain a better understanding of the experiences of those who are working and/or actively seeking employment. Third, while our study included participants with varying disabilities in the Arab-Gulf region, we were also unable to interview anyone with intellectual disability, a population that has been the focus of a considerable number of studies in this region.

We have yet to determine if this was due to very few individuals with intellectual disabilities who fell in our inclusion criteria, or whether they have additional barriers to employment that lead them to be unemployed. Therefore, we propose that future studies involve individuals with disabilities from all Arab-Gulf countries, examine factors that influence individuals with disabilities to remain unemployed, and include individual with different types of disabilities.

Despite these limitations, we have begun to address the paucity of research on the topic. We provide a beginning examination of the career experiences of individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf, and the role that self-determination plays in their career decisions and ongoing employment. Results can be generalized to individuals with disabilities in the Arab-Gulf, in light of the following three considerations. First, the six Arab-Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—have designated regional (Secretariat General of Gulf Cooperation Council 2015, Article 24) and national laws that honor individuals with disabilities' right to have careers and gain employment in government and private institutions (Bahrain Legislation and Legal 2006; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Labour 2006; Kuwaiti Society for the

Guardians of Disabled 2010; Al Meezan 2004; Oman Ministry of Social Development 2008; UAE 2019). Second, the six countries' common characteristics, such as their cultures, official religion, and emerging economies, further serve to set up the context in which the results are potentially relevant for individuals with disabilities across the Arab-Gulf countries. Lastly, building on the previous two considerations of a shared identity, the target population of this study largely represents the individuals with disabilities population in the Arab-Gulf, as detailed in the participants section in this paper.

Notes

[1] A Muezzin is the person who proclaims the call to the daily prayer at a mosque.

[2] *Imam* is the person who leads Muslim worshippers in prayer at a mosque.

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