



# The Educational and Occupational Trajectories of Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities in India

Supported by:



British  
High Commission  
New Delhi

## 1. Background and rationale for the study

While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obligates the state to meet the learning needs of all children,<sup>1</sup> and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) specifically refers to the rights to be secured for persons with disabilities,<sup>2</sup> empirical evidence highlights that globally persons with disabilities experience comparatively lower educational attainment, lower employment, and worse standards of living and poverty, than persons without disabilities (WHO 2011; DFID 2018).

Evidence related to persons with disabilities living in low- and middle-income countries is particularly scarce, and longitudinal evidence of their life trajectories related to education, occupation and family formation is extremely limited. Given this shortage of data and the urgent need to address this gap in order to inform policy discourse, Young Lives India<sup>3</sup> recently undertook a study on the educational and occupational trajectories of adolescents and youths with disabilities in India.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Research questions

The study's primary objective was to examine the educational and occupational experiences and trajectories of persons with disabilities in order to capture the barriers and enablers that they encountered.

The research questions explored were:

- To identify facilitators and barriers to successful completion of primary/secondary education experienced by children and young adults with disabilities.
  - At what age and level of education did children and young adults with diverse needs discontinue education?
  - Who made decisions that affected the educational trajectories of children and young adults with disabilities?
  - What were the factors (school/institutional, public programmes and policies, familial, social

and environmental) supporting or hampering the education of children and young adults with disabilities?

- To capture labour market outcomes for young persons with disabilities.
  - What were their trajectories from education to child work and the labour market? How did these experiences differ based on age, gender, type of impairment, marital status and level of education?
  - What factors supported or hindered entry into the labour market?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the education and livelihoods of persons with disabilities?

## 3. Methodology

Mixed methods<sup>5</sup> research was undertaken to bring together:

1. **Panel survey analysis** of data from the five rounds of the Young Lives longitudinal survey (2001–2016) on the educational and occupational outcomes of 100 young persons<sup>6</sup> who had self-identified as having disabilities (from a Younger Cohort aged 15 and an Older Cohort aged 22 in 2016);<sup>7</sup> and
2. **Qualitative findings** from an in-depth qualitative study with a sub-sample of 34 young persons with disabilities<sup>8</sup> and their caregivers in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, in November–December 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the children were aged 18 (Younger Cohort) and 25 (Older Cohort).

The existing quantitative data were analysed first, which then informed the subsequent qualitative study. A research advisory group of policymakers and academics discussed the research findings to address policy gaps and develop policy recommendations to enhance the quality of life of persons with disabilities.

Drawing on both data sources, the analysis explored the facilitators and barriers that adolescents and youth with disabilities faced in their educational trajectories, and their related transitions to the labour market, and to marriage and family formation. It also captured the effects of the lockdown on their lives and aspirations for the future.

1 Article 1 of the CRC defines a child as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'.

2 Article 1 of the CRPD defines persons with disabilities to 'include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

3 Young Lives is a global mixed-methods study of childhood poverty has collected data from 12,000 children across four countries (Peru, Vietnam, India, Ethiopia) since 2001. In India, 3,000 children and their families have been studied across 20 sentinel sites in undivided Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, after 2014) through five quantitative survey rounds and four qualitative sub-studies.

4 See Singh et al. (2021) for full details of the study. An accompanying policy brief also provides policy recommendations. See Singh, R. (2021) 'The Educational and Occupational Trajectories of Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities in India' Policy Brief 48, Oxford: Young Lives.

5 Mixed-method designs do not attempt to reconcile different epistemological orientations, but rather emphasise the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative methods and their practical application to answer the research questions.

6 It is important not to generalise from the findings of this study, given the small sample size.

7 Details of the Younger Cohort and Older Cohort by gender, disability, location, caste and wealth index are provided in Annex 1 of the main report (Singh et al. 2021).

8 Details of the sub-sample are provided in Annex 2 of the main report (Singh et al. 2021).

## 4. Findings from the panel survey analysis

### *Persons with disabilities are deprived of educational opportunities*

The Young Lives Round 5 survey reveals that of the 100 persons (Younger and Older Cohort) with a self-reported disability, 10 per cent had never enrolled in school. All of these were persons with high support needs. Furthermore, 47.1 per cent of persons with disabilities had completed elementary education at age 15, compared to 77.5 per cent of persons without disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, at age 22 only 53.3 per cent of persons with disabilities had completed secondary and above education, compared to 76.9 per cent of persons without disabilities<sup>10</sup> (Figures 1 and 2).

### *Persons with disabilities are deprived of employment opportunities*

These glaring inequalities have a cascading effect on employment opportunities. Only 63.3 per cent of persons with disabilities were engaged in employment at age 22, compared to 71 per cent of those without disabilities. Disaggregated data reveal that with respect to regular salaried employment, 31.6 per cent of persons with disabilities were engaged in salaried jobs at age 22, with an average salary of INR 5,750 per month, compared to 34.8 per cent of those without disabilities, with an average salary of INR 9,136 per month. Persons with disabilities in salaried employment on average earned 37 per cent less than persons without disabilities (Figure 3).

### *Gender inequity exists in educational opportunities among persons with disabilities*

Disaggregated data by gender reveal that among persons with disabilities, young men fared better than young women in terms of education. At age 15, 54.5 per cent of boys with disabilities had completed elementary education, compared to 51.7 per cent of girls with disabilities, while at age 22, 66.7 per cent of men with disabilities had completed secondary education and above, compared to 50 per cent of women with disabilities.

### *Gender inequity exists in employment opportunities among persons with disabilities*

Gender inequity in educational opportunities is mirrored in inequity in transitions to labour market with all of the men with disabilities engaged in paid employment at age 22, compared to only 54.2 per cent of women with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

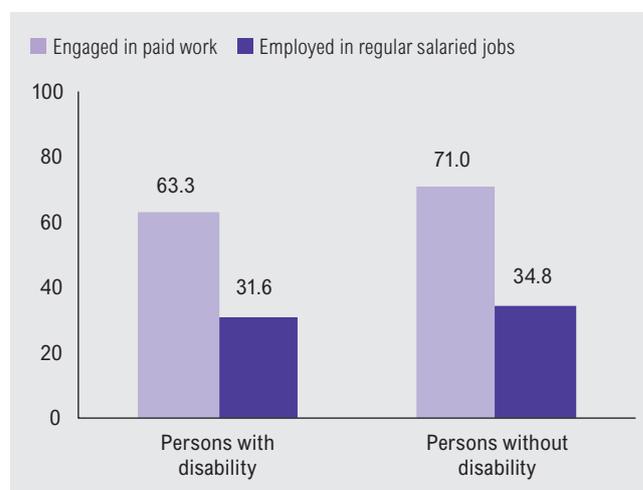
**Figure 1: Comparison of Level of Education Attained by Children with and Without Disability (at Age 15)**



**Figure 2: Comparison of Highest Level of Education Attained by Persons With and Without Disability (at Age 22)**



**Figure 3: Comparison of Employment Between Youth with and without Disability (at age 22)**



<sup>9</sup> Analysis based on the Younger Cohort data (Young Lives Round 5).

<sup>10</sup> Analysis based on the Older Cohort data (Young Lives Round 5).

<sup>11</sup> It is important not to generalise from the findings of this study, given the small sample size.

## 5. Findings from the in-depth qualitative study

Building upon the quantitative data, the qualitative study explored the lived experiences of persons with disabilities from a life-course perspective to identify the enablers and barriers to their education and employment.

### ***Many persons with disabilities transition through education without being labelled or classified as disabled***

Unlike in many Western countries where labelling and classification of persons with disabilities is common, it would appear from the qualitative study that most young persons with disabilities transitioned through school without such labels. Only three persons with disabilities (out of a sample of 34) enrolled into special schools, while the majority with varying impairments (from mild physical impairment to sensory and cognitive impairments) attended government or low-fee charging private schools. In the absence of any special educators and no accommodations put in place by mainstream teachers, these children had to make adjustments and often sought the help of peers to cope with school. Although all teachers need to be trained to address the diverse needs of children in their classrooms, the absence of stigmatisation attached to labels of disability for these children may have worked in their favour and helped in social, if not academic inclusion.

### ***The educational trajectories of persons with disabilities vary depending on the nature and severity of their disability***

Persons with physical disabilities fared significantly better than those with other disabilities in terms of education opportunities, with five out of seven people interviewed at age 18 having completed secondary education. Fewer persons with visual impairments attained similar educational levels (only two out of the five completed secondary education)<sup>12</sup> and similarly, among those with hearing impairments, only seven out of 12 completed secondary education. Of the four persons with multiple impairments and three with intellectual impairments, only one had completed elementary education.

### ***Young people with high support needs and their families remain the most vulnerable, with limited access to early intervention, education and care facilities***

For young people with high support needs, exclusion begins at an early age, with a limited number being enrolled and the few who do enrol 'pushed out' and excluded on account of limited learning aids and teacher resources. This exclusion process impacts not only the person with the disability but

the family as a whole, with limited opportunities available for labour market transitions and care facilities.

### ***There are limited opportunities for skill development and government jobs, despite 4 per cent of such jobs being reserved for persons with disabilities***

The nature of employment of persons with disabilities varied, from daily wage earners on farms or factories, paid domestic work, running their own grocery shop, autorickshaw driver and mechanic, to entrepreneurs. Only one young woman with a disability (physical impairment) was working in a regular professional job as a staff nurse. There was inadequate skill training, with only two out of the 34 young people having received vocational training, and a lack of awareness about disability-related schemes such as funds for entrepreneurs under the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC). At age 25, only one young man with a disability was an entrepreneur (out of ten Older Cohort young people). None of the young people had secured a government job, despite 4 per cent of all government jobs being reserved for persons with disabilities. All the respondents had limited information about career choices, with knowledge mainly acquired from friends and family, again pointing to limited career avenues for young persons with disabilities.

### ***The ambitions and aspirations of persons with disabilities vary over time***

The aspirations and ambitions of persons with disabilities had changed over time and become aligned to the opportunities available to them. Only three out of the eight 25-year-old women with disabilities were in paid employment and the majority of married women, including those who had finished school, were dedicated to unpaid housework and caregiving for their families, and not working outside the home. Most did not express any ambition or aspiration to engage in work outside the household.

### ***The family formation of persons with disabilities was not impacted by educational and employment trajectories***

At age 25, the overwhelming majority of women with disabilities were married (seven out of eight women) regardless of their educational or employment trajectories, and none of their partners had a disability. It appears that disability did not stand in the way of young women with disabilities getting married to men without disabilities, although information on dowries was limited and there was no insight on any financial incentive being offered to the groom or their family.<sup>13</sup> Encouragingly, at age 25, two women with physical disabilities noted having a 'love marriage' and without a dowry, pointing towards the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

<sup>12</sup> The Older Cohort qualitative study sample contained no people with visual impairments.

<sup>13</sup> Three women with disabilities spoke of dowry being given to the groom's family and there was significant variation, ranging from INR 40,000 to INR 500,000.

### ***Strong family bonds and support mechanisms exist for persons with disabilities***

In Indian society the model of interdependence within the family structure has aided significantly in the growth trajectory of persons with disabilities. An overwhelming majority (32 of the 34) acknowledged the ongoing help of family members, peers and supportive teachers. The absence of supportive institutional mechanisms was replaced by parental, siblings, friends and/or spousal (financial and emotional) support.

### ***The well-being of persons with disabilities and engagement within communities***

Across both young men and young women with disabilities, those with physical and sensory impairments were actively included within the family structure and integrated within the community. These young people highlighted that their disabilities did not adversely impact their emotional or psychological well-being as they were growing up, and shared how they made adjustments to their life circumstances as they transitioned into adulthood. They appeared to be well-assimilated within their communities and only those with severe behavioural difficulties faced stigmatisation. Social exclusion was noted only among those with severe intellectual impairments, with family members noting high levels of prejudice and ostracisation towards the person with a disability and the family as a whole.

## **6. Barriers and facilitators to education and employment**

### ***Education***

- **Key barriers** identified included both school-related factors (such as infrastructure, lack of inclusive practices such as accommodations and adaptations, bullying, lack of assistive devices and school transport, insensitive teachers, and corporal punishment) as well as out-of-school factors (such as poverty, death of a caregiver, and marriage). There were no early intervention services available for children with high support needs, and schools were also not prepared to include children with epilepsy.

While children complained about bullying and corporal punishment, the absence of aids such as mobility training and braille books, and teachers who made no special provisions to address their individual needs, many dropped out of school due to familial circumstances such as the death of a caregiver, care responsibilities or financial stress. A large number of young persons with disabilities were unable to get disability certificates, and early marriage also disrupted

the educational trajectories of girls with disabilities.

- **Key facilitators** to successful educational transitions included high parental aspirations, as well as encouraging teachers and supportive friends. Young persons with disabilities displayed immense resilience and despite infrastructural barriers, successfully transitioned through secondary education, with a few moving on to higher education. Encouragement from sensitive teachers was quoted as a key factor in motivating students with disabilities. While there was no gender discrimination observed in educational trajectories at the elementary level, there was clear gender inequity at the secondary level, with more boys than girls completing secondary education. It is encouraging to note that many young persons with disabilities from the bottom wealth tercile and rural areas completed secondary education, largely due to their self-determination.

### ***Employment***

- **Key barriers:** A lack of educational opportunities had a negative effect on labour market transitions, and other barriers included the absence of career counselling services as well as lack of skill training opportunities. A lack of awareness about schemes such as funds for entrepreneurs under the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC), and 4 per cent of government jobs being reserved for persons with disabilities, further impacted young persons with disabilities taking up entrepreneurial ventures and procuring secure jobs. The majority of young persons with disabilities had no option but to take low-paying jobs in the informal sector, such as daily wage work in the agricultural sector.

Gender disparity in employment was seen, with limited numbers of young women with disabilities engaged in paid employment. Poor work conditions included work that was tiring, late payments, a lack of training and development opportunities, and no adaptations to meet the needs of the person with disabilities. Those with high support needs were not provided with any care support services as they grew older, with the entire burden of care falling on their family members.

- **Key facilitators:** Family members and friends were a major source of support as young persons with disabilities transitioned to the labour market. Many spoke of the tremendous support provided by parents, siblings and peers who motivated them to find work. Young men with disabilities expressed their ambition and agency to improve their lives through work, with a few planning to migrate from rural to urban areas in search of new opportunities.

## 7. Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on persons with disabilities

The prolonged lockdown has had a massive impact on the livelihoods of the households of persons with disabilities as these households were largely engaged in the unorganised/informal sector<sup>14</sup> which faced disruption due to the pandemic. In total, 24 out of 34 households reported financial difficulties, and while 27 households received free food rations during the lockdown, eight households specifically reported food insecurity. Families of young persons with intellectual and multiple disabilities were most significantly compromised as they were deprived of access to medical care due to the lockdown. Five of these seven persons with disabilities and/or their family members reported that the pandemic caused significant difficulties on a daily basis, and the lack of medical care resulted in additional stress and anxiety.

The research brief offers important evidence on the barriers and enablers related to the educational and occupational trajectories of persons with disabilities. These findings have key policy implications for practitioners and policy makers to better realise and secure the rights of persons with disabilities.

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<sup>14</sup> This includes daily wage earners, auto drivers and construction workers.

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## Acknowledgements

This research brief is written by Renu Singh. It is based on the report Singh, R., U. Vennam, J. Narayan, A. Tandon, and G. Crivello (2021) 'The Educational and Occupational Trajectories of Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities in India', Oxford: Young Lives. Thanks to Adam Houlbrook for copyediting, Garth Stewart for design and Julia Tilford for overseeing the publication process. We particularly wish to thank the Young Lives participants and their families for generously giving us their time and cooperation.

This report has been commissioned by the South Asia Research Hub, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), Government Of UK. However, the views expressed in the report do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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High Commission  
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Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development (ODID)  
University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK

[www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

Tel: +44 (0)1865 281751 • Email: [younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:younglives@qeh.ox.ac.uk) • Twitter: @yloxford