

Disability

Working Persons with Disabilities Coming Out of Poverty - Paradigm Shift in Disabilities and Labor

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Organizers: Gwangju Human Right Center for People with Disabilities,
Gwangju Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination

Background

Korea is one of the OECD countries where income inequality is deepening at the fastest pace. Since the launch of Yoon Seok Yeol administration, the Korean government has paid less policy attention to addressing economic inequality, expanding welfare benefit, and to ensuring human rights. This has aggravated the issues of poverty and inequality and has put the vulnerable, especially the persons with disabilities, at the highest risk of inequality.

In 2019, the poverty rate of persons with disabilities was 42.2%, which was 2.6 times higher than that of the entire population (16.3%). The poverty rate among persons with disabilities has been increasing from 40.4% in 2017, 41.5% in 2018, and to 42.2% in 2019. However, the poverty rate among persons without disabilities has been declining from 16.3% in 2017, 15.6% in 2018, and to 15.2% in 2019. It shows that income disparity between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities is worsening. According to the 2020 Survey of Household Finances and Living Conditions by Statistics Korea, the average income of the households with disabilities was KRW 42.46 million, which is 71.5% of the average income (KRW 52.94 million) of the entire households. However, the average income of the households with severe disabilities is less than 50% of the average income of the entire households. It indicates that there is an even bigger income gap between persons with severe disabilities and persons without disabilities. As described above, persons with disabilities experience severe economic poverty, which drives them into multifaceted poverty in terms of housing, care, healthcare, education, and labor while even threatening their human rights. Persons with disabilities have a limited opportunity to work and learn in our society and are consequently excluded from society and economy. They are suffering from double challenges of disabilities and poverty, being unable to move away from poverty once they fall into it.

Persons with disabilities experience poverty not just because of their functional constraints caused by physical or mental disabilities. A more fundamental reason for their poverty lies in the stigma and



prejudice by the society that persons with disabilities are unable to engage in labor. The fundamental reasons for their poverty also include the followings: the capitalist labor system centered around persons without disabilities that exclude persons with disabilities; the limited approach to solving these poverty issues based on the efforts to simply increase public income and welfare services including social services. However, such a traditional way of expanding welfare services has made persons with disabilities a passive beneficiary of welfare service and a target to be controlled and managed in the social welfare system. This has consequently placed persons with disabilities in a cycle of poverty, where they cannot move beyond a certain condition of living just like the recipients of national basic livelihood allowance or the near-poor population.

Objectives

One of the biggest topics in the society on persons with disabilities is the shift of labor paradigm from traditional concept of ‘labor as charity’ to the ‘labor as the rights of persons with disabilities.’ The ‘Rights-based, Customized Public Jobs Program for Persons with Severe Disabilities (hereinafter referred to as ‘Rights-based Public Jobs Program’) has been implemented by districts in Seoul since 2020. This program is an example of how to practice ideas and values, which is the most important part to realize the commitment of ‘Leave No One Behind’ that was declared by UN to achieve a sustainable world. This program enables persons with severe disabilities to participate in labor and thereby produce their own rights themselves and change the society that is centered around persons without disabilities. Besides the ‘Rights-based Public Jobs Program’, efforts are required to improve the existing vocational rehabilitation systems including the sheltered workshops where persons with disabilities are working under protected employment conditions, but their human rights are not being respected in terms of the labor practice. It is also necessary for the central government and local municipalities to make efforts to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities. There are persons with disabilities who are not paid the minimum wage due to Article 7 of the Minimum Wage Act which stipulates that the minimum wage may not apply to ‘those who have significantly low work capability due to mental or physical disabilities.’ The persons with disabilities, who are not paid the minimum wage, receive an estimated monthly wage of KRW 379,622. What makes the situation even worse is the fact that there is no lower limit for the wage paid to the persons with disabilities and that some persons with disabilities such as trainees with disabilities work under poorer working conditions even if they do the same work as employees with disabilities. In 2014, UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities already talked to the Korean government that it is “concerned about the continuous operation of sheltered workshops that pay persons with disabilities below the minimum wage and that do not aim to enter an open labor market.



Under the theme ‘paradigm shift in the labor of persons with disabilities’, <Thematic Session: Disabilities> aims to address the paradigm of labor which is considered the fundamental cause of poverty and inequality for persons with disabilities. Aiming to help persons with disabilities enjoy their human dignity and make contribution to the local community as independent human beings, we will discuss 1) how to change the existing ability-oriented labor structure that is centered around the persons without disabilities and to enable persons with disabilities to engage in labor, and 2) how to establish a system to support persons with disabilities to move away from poverty for themselves. In doing so, we will share the experience of a foreign country (Sweden) and look into the current poverty and labor situations of Korean persons with disabilities. Based on this, we will have discussion with Gwangju Metropolitan City, Korea Employment Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the working-level staff from vocational rehabilitation facilities for persons with disabilities and from rights-based public employment institutions as well as with persons with disabilities about how to improve and develop the current labor system.

<References >

- <Korea’s Income Disparity Widens at the Second-Fastest Pace among OECD Countries>, The Hankyoreh News, Apr. 10th, 2023.
- < Survey of Household Finances and Living Conditions>, Statistics Korea, 2020.
- <2020 Poverty & Income Inequality Indicators for Persons with Disabilities>, Korea’s Disabled People’s Development Institute, 2021.

Main Agenda

1. Check the case examples of employment and labor of persons with disabilities at SAMHALL, a state-owned company in Sweden.
2. Check the current status of poverty and income inequality for persons with disabilities in Korea.
3. Identify challenges and seek ways of improvement to shift the labor paradigm of persons with disabilities and to increase the employment of persons with disabilities.

