

Regulatory Compliance and Best Practice in Archival Accessibility for People with Disabilities in Oman

Abderrazak Mkadmi¹, Faten Hamad²

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess how accessible archives are for persons with disabilities in Oman, considering the effectiveness of national and international regulations related to this matter, and determining the problems of their implementation. Accordingly, the methodology of the research has been qualitative, combining documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews. The main focus of the documentary analysis is key legislative frameworks which include the Law on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also known as CRPD, among other sector-specific regulations. Semi-structured interviews with representatives of five public institutions responsible for disability rights and public services were conducted, including the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Children's Public Library. The results reveal that while Oman has made laudable steps toward establishing a legal framework that ensures the physical accessibility of archives, major gaps can still be identified in the implementation mechanisms related to digital accessibility. Inconsistent enforcement, limited oversight, and the lack of specific regulations relating to archives were identified as major barriers. Those who took part in the consultation emphasized the need for increased awareness and training, coupled with the use of assistive technologies, to promote improved physical and digital access. It concludes that Oman needs to work towards effective enforcement of its regulations and learn from international best practice if it is to achieve full accessibility in archival services.

Keywords: Archival Access, Disability Rights, Oman, Legal Frameworks, Digital Access, Assistive Technologies.

Introduction

In the last few years, accessibility to archives for persons with disabilities has become a priority within the scope of policies related to inclusion and human rights at international level. This is because archives, as preservers of historical memory, must be accessible to all, independent of the physical, sensorial, or cognitive characteristics of people (Lawson, 2014). However, despite important progress in international law, the practice of these inclusive attitudes respecting archives is still incompletely fulfilled. Whilst international conventions, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), emphasize the necessity of inclusive access, significant gaps remain in the implementation of these policies. This is particularly true in developing countries, such as the Sultanate of Oman, where accessibility issues, especially in the archival sector, continue to be a challenge despite progressive legislation like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 (Jaeger et al., 2015; Brilmyer, 2020).

The CRPD obliges member states, including Oman, to ensure equitable access to archives by implementing adequate infrastructure and accessible formats, such as braille and assistive technologies (Trevisan & Cogburn, 2020). Despite this, discrepancies between legal frameworks and practical implementation persist globally. For instance, Vlasenko (2022) highlighted similar barriers in Ukraine, where advanced legislation exists, yet accessibility remains limited. In Oman, the challenge is further compounded by a lack of digital accessibility standards, leaving individuals with disabilities facing significant barriers when accessing both physical and digital archives.

Whilst Oman has made strides in adapting physical infrastructure to accommodate persons with disabilities, such as ramps and Braille signage (Malley, 2021), the absence of comprehensive digital accessibility standards continues to hinder full inclusion in the archival sector. This article seeks to explore the extent to which Oman's regulatory frameworks on archival accessibility are being implemented and to identify best practices that can bridge these gaps. The guiding question of this research is: how effectively are national and international regulations on archival accessibility for

¹ Sultan Qaboos University, Oman / University of Manouba, Tunisia; a.mkadmi1@squ.edu.om

² Sultan Qaboos University, Oman / The University of Jordan, Jordan; f.hamad@squ.edu.om

persons with disabilities being enforced in Oman, and what strategies can enhance their implementation?

Objectives of the study

Drawing on international examples of success, such as the accessibility standards outlined in Canada's Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and the European Union's EN 301 549 guidelines for digital accessibility (Martínez & Pluke, 2013), this study aims to identify how far existing legislative frameworks are translated into practice by archival institutions and the gaps in compliance and enforcement and hence to provide recommendations for improving Oman's archival accessibility. These strategies include enhancing the digitization of archives, integrating assistive technologies, and promoting ongoing professional development for archival staff (O'Sullivan & Alexander, 2020). By addressing the barriers identified, this study hopes to contribute to a more inclusive approach in Oman's archival institutions, ensuring that the right to access historical memory is extended to all members of society.

Literature review

The focus of this literature review, therefore, is on the progress and impediments encountered in various countries, including Oman, in formulating, regulating, supervising, and enforcing accessibility policies toward archives. It draws on a selection of international studies to comment on how accessibility laws are interpreted and applied, assistive technologies, and good practices in archival services. The aim is to also review the recurring challenges, faced in the absence of specific guidelines for archives, and the inconsistency in the application of the laws, with possible ways of improvement according to the international models.

National regulations and legal frameworks on access to archives

National regulations and legal frameworks to ensure access to archives for persons with disabilities play a central role in social inclusion. At international level, for example the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is one basic legal framework. Signed by many countries, including Oman, the CRPD obliges states to ensure equitable access to archives by ensuring adequate infrastructure and accessible formats of information, such as Braille and assistive technologies (Lawson, 2014).

However, many researchers, such as Jaeger et al. (2015), point out that although laws exist, their implementation often remains incomplete, particularly in developing countries. The problem is that the legislative framework is often too general and leaves public institutions-archives among them-with very little concrete guidance. It is the same in Oman, for instance, where the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, enacted in 2008, imposes obligations on public institutions; the implementation, however, remains partial, as is the case with archives. Literature also shows that this shortcoming is common on a global scale. For example, Vlasenko (2022) demonstrates what, even in a country like Ukraine, with advanced legislation in place, there are still substantial barriers to the accessibility of archival documents for people with disabilities.

Other comparative studies, such as Trevisan and Cogburn (2020), equally suggest that even with the most favorable legal frameworks, actual practice in terms of their implementation remains problematic, even in more developed settings. They show how countries like Canada, with its AODA, still have many challenges to make records truly accessible.

Oversight Bodies and Mechanisms for Compliance

Oversight and compliance mechanisms are essential to ensure the enforcement of accessibility laws. In many countries, multiple agencies are responsible for ensuring compliance with regulations regarding the accessibility of public services, including archives. In Oman, for example, the Ministry

of Social Development and the State Financial and Administrative Control Authority play a central role in monitoring the implementation of disability rights laws.

However, as Lazar and Wentz (2012) observed, the effectiveness of these monitoring mechanisms varies considerably across countries. In the United States, although robust laws exist, enforcement remains uneven due to a lack of rigorous oversight. This observation echoes the findings of Brilmyer (2020), who points out that the absence of strong oversight mechanisms allows institutions to deviate from their obligations without facing consequences.

In Oman, the lack of rigorous oversight, particularly regarding digital accessibility, is a recurring issue. Jaeger et al. (2015) showed that even in countries where accessibility laws are in place, without effective oversight it is difficult to ensure that institutions will comply with their obligations. In this context, Oman follows a global trend where existing oversight mechanisms often lack the resources and rigor to ensure uniform enforcement of regulations.

Ways of applying regulations

Accessibility regulations are applied in some quite diverse ways among institutions and national contexts. At international level, there are studies such as Martínez and Pluke (2013), which make mention of innovative solutions-just to mention the integration of assistive technologies and digitization of archives-which guarantee, effectively, access to information for people with disabilities.

It is regrettable that despite these good practices, the application of regulations in archival institutions often remains limited. Accessibility, especially in archives, is still impeded by a lack of a systemic approach to full inclusion, according to the conclusions made by O'Sullivan and Alexander (2020). This finding easily flows from Brilmyer (2020), who shows that even in those countries where accessibility regulations exist, archives struggle to integrate technologies adapted to people with visual or hearing impairments.

In Oman, one such study regarding the implementation methods of the institution showed successful implementation of physical adaptation, such as ramps and Braille signage. However, incomplete implementation of digital accessibility standards remains, just like in other countries. Malley (2021) also explained how, worldwide, archives often remain behind in terms of the use of accessible digital technologies; this is an increasingly digital world.

Legislative and Policy Achievements on Access to Archives

The development of accessibility policy and legislation has gone forward in many countries. In the State of Oman, for example, initiatives include participation in the Unified Law for the GCC on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adaptation of some physical infrastructures in archives, as shown from installations such as ramps and Braille signs, which indicate increased awareness of ensuring that people with disabilities are able to access the archives.

This is further evidenced by international literature. For example, in Europe, the standards under EN 301 549, as referred to by Martínez and Pluke (2013), even extend digital accessibility to archives. For many countries where such efforts are being considered, this digitization is an important step to greater inclusion. Meanwhile, Brilmyer (2020) points out that even while policy-level initiatives may have been taken, for many archives, digital inclusion remains a major challenge.

Oman's moves toward inclusion are reflected in various legislative undertakings, regional collaborations, and the like; however, as Malley has pointed out, this sort of inclusion requires sustained effort, particularly in terms of making digital technologies accessible.

Implementation issues regarding regulations

The challenges of implementing regulations on archival accessibility are numerous, both in Oman and in other countries. The complications of legal frameworks are among the key hindrances observed in literature. Čavkoska (2018) says that because such sectors such as archives do not have clear directives, the laws on disability tend to be very general; hence, applying them is a big challenge. Indeed, this observation remains true even in Oman, where regulations lack explicit guidelines that should ensure accessibility of records, especially in the digital environment.

Brilmyer (2022) highlights how societal attitudes towards disability can influence policy implementation. In Oman, cultural attitudes significantly impact how institutions perceive and address accessibility issues. Interviews reveal that while goodwill exists, it does not always translate into concrete actions.

Additionally, the lack of strong sanctions for non-compliance with accessibility laws, as emphasized by Lazar and Wentz (2012), presents a global challenge that is also evident in Oman. Without effective monitoring mechanisms and dissuasive penalties, institutions are often not incentivized to comply with regulations. Stewart and Dean (2021) observed that, although the Caribbean has enacted some stringent laws, the absence of sanctions has resulted in poor implementation—highlighting a parallel with the challenges faced in Oman.

The literature review therefore shows that Oman faces challenges that are common to many countries regarding the accessibility of archives to people with disabilities. Although there has been progress regarding physical infrastructure and regional cooperation, the lack of specific regulations for archives added to very poor application standards on digital accessibility is a serious barrier. International comparisons reveal that for effective implementation of accessibility policies, rigorous monitoring, sanctions in cases of failure, and continuous training for archiving professionals are needed. The experience of other countries, such as Canada and some in Europe, might bring valuable lessons to help Oman bridge the gap between policy and practice, at least where digital accessibility is concerned.

Methodology

This was a qualitative research design study that utilized both documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews to evaluate how well archives accommodate persons with disabilities in Oman. The national and international legislative frameworks whose critical documentary analyses were to be studied included the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and sector-specific legislation such as the Cultural Heritage Law 35/2019. These were reviewed in order to contextualize how regulations relating to accessibility are organized and policed in Oman, particularly as they relate to public services such as archives. Other materials that were reviewed included government reports and archival guidelines for background on enforcement.

The analysis was conducted in parallel with semi-structured interviews with representatives of five key public institutions involved in disability rights and the delivery of public services (Table1).

Table 1: Sample Details

Entity / Institution	Code
Ministry of Education - Legal Affairs Department	A1
Ministry of Social Development	A2
Children's Public Library	A3
Ministry of Justice	A4
Ministry of Education	A5
Ministry of Social Development - Visually Impaired Employee	A6

These interviews try to explain how participants perceive the operation of national regulations in practice and what challenges exist to ensure equal access to archives for persons with disabilities. This methodology was designed to offer a broadened understanding of the regulatory framework and its practical application in Oman through documentary analysis, combined with qualitative insights from key stakeholders.

This approach will give a better understanding of the deficiencies in the implementation of legislation in Oman, drawing reasonable suggestions from similar international experiences. The endeavor is, therefore, to present the way forward for improving accessibility to the archives through legal reforms and adoption of enabling technologies.

Analysis of results

National regulations and legal frameworks are important in ensuring individual rights that guarantee justice and equality in society. The regulation of access to persons with disabilities through policies and enabling legislation assumes great relevance, especially in facilitating their access to basic services. These services include accessing archival repositories charged with the custody and control of records and information. Full access to archives, therefore, defines a country's commitment toward ensuring an inclusive and just environment for all citizens. The Sultanate of Oman is continuously developing policies related to accessibility for persons with disabilities; however, assessing how effective those regulations are, and the level of their enforcement on the ground remains one of the key issues in understanding the gaps and challenges persons with disabilities face while trying to access archives. Also, study of the legal framework and responsible regulatory body has contributed to determining the amount of progress made, whether reforms or amendments are needed, and if so, how to achieve sustainability in this respect.

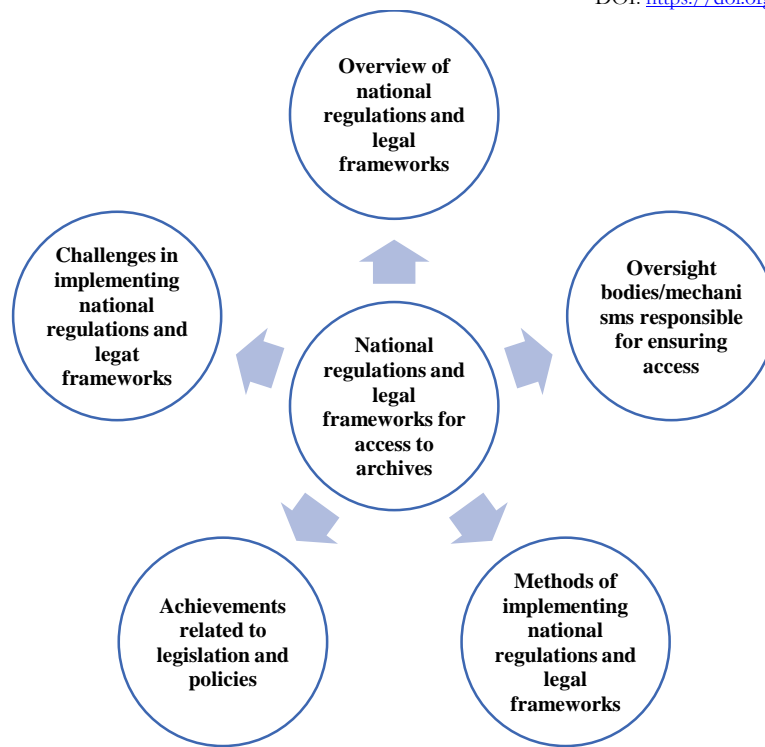


Fig. 1: National regulations and legal frameworks for access to archives

Overview of National Regulations and Legal Frameworks

The documentary analysis conducted for the purpose of this research has shown that Oman has a good legislative policy, protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, through an especially striking law-the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities-enacted in 2008, which guarantees a wide range of rights to all categories of physical, sensory, and intellectually disabled people, including requiring adaptation of public institutions, such as archives. These are in the form of ramps, Braille signage, and other services available to offer equal access. Apart from national legislation, Oman ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, whereby it further committed itself to international standards for accessibility. This convention obligates states to offer access to information in appropriate formats, either in Braille, accessible electronic formats, and also assistive technologies.

Whilst these legislative frameworks exist, therefore, their actual application is not uniform. A few public institutions have appropriately adapted to these demands, especially regarding physical access, while many others can only dream of implementation due to either budgetary limitations or lax regulatory oversight. The documentary analysis reveals that whereas there has been increased physical access to the archives, obvious gaps still exist as far as digital accessibility is concerned. Similarly, whilst physical structures have been reasonably well accommodated, many archives have not included the technological measures of screen readers and adapted interfaces that would make access available for visually or hearing-impaired individuals. This lag in terms of physical versus digital access shows that, within Oman, despite notable progress to meet international commitments, a lot of work is yet to be done for complete and proper application of such laws within their practices.

The interview results also confirm this assertion, as respondents also have mixed opinions about whether there are national regulations concerning access to the archives for disabled people and where such exist how well they are applied. Indeed, some interviewees verified that there are detailed regulations on general rights and services concerning people with disabilities among other

things. To be precise, they acknowledged the fact that there are laws that ensure the provision of services pertaining to accessible public spaces and, by extension, the archives. The participants further pointed out that there are no specific legal frameworks or directives related to access to archives by people with disabilities. A5 further reiterated that the most apparent policies are about social inclusion and integration, which do not directly indicate or show direct interest in the need for accessibility to be foregrounded within archival institutions. As some of the respondents pointed out, many recommendations by government supervisors often refer more to the social integration of disabled persons and thus leave the particular question of access to archives underexplored.

Furthermore, respondents expressed the view that these laws are applied inconsistently in different institutions. Although some of these public services or institutions actually took measures relating to accessibility, there is no good implementation of such regulations specifically in archives. According to the responses, despite general legislation on disability, it has not provided any directives to foster access to archives, and it has become quite serious in regard to digital access. This has brought about unequal enforcement and unequal levels of access in different archival institutions. Again, participants identified that Oman also needs to look for successful models and experiences from other countries for creating more inclusive access to archives, especially within the context of digital barriers.

Both the documentary analysis and interview findings indicated that, although Oman has taken steps towards establishing a legal framework for disability rights, the actual implementation of such laws in relation to access to archives remains inconsistent. Well-defined specific guidelines on archival access, as well as inconsistent implementation of physical and digital accessibility, are all serious challenges. For Oman to move forward with this issue, it will need to cede ground to the reinforcement of regulatory enforcement, improvement in digital accessibility, and specific legal provisions to ensure accessibility in archival information for all citizens, including those with disabilities.

Enforcement Bodies and Mechanisms for Compliance

The documentary analysis identified a number of key institutions involved in enforcing the regulations that will ensure equal access to archives for persons with disabilities in Oman. The Ministry of Social Development was mainly responsible for developing and enforcing policies on disability rights. This is supposed to ensure the use of laws in checking institutions for compliance with standard rules of access. The oversight role also lies with the State Financial and Administrative Audit Authority among other departments. It undertakes audits and assessments of public institutions with regard to their compliance with laws related to the rights of persons with disabilities. Reports compiled by this authority are important in appraising the effects of those policies in question, including access to archives. Moreover, units within the ministries, such as legal and audit departments, complement the enforcement of national regulations. These units are engaged in observing compliance with accessibility legislation and help ensure that institutions provide equal access to their services, including archives.

While some of these mechanisms of oversight exist, the documentary analysis revealed that supervision is rarely complete; either stringent monitoring and its enforcement, or both, are lacking, or both, in particular areas of ensuring the same level of access digitally in the archives. Whilst much attention is directed at compliance in physical infrastructures, digital platforms deployed by archival institutions are more often left out. This lack of oversight has meant that the above regulations apply disparately to various institutions, making some archives more accessible than others. It is hinted that stricter enforcement with clearly defined penalties might ensure that all institutions rise to the standards of accessibility.

The interviews provide further details on the oversight entities and their effectiveness. The Ministry of Social Development was the most-mentioned entity by participants in respect of being in charge

of enforcing compliance by institutions to the laws regulating disability rights in the land, (A1, A3, A6). This Ministry, according to participants, collaborates with other arms of the government like the Royal Oman Police to implement legal provisions effectively (A1). In particular, the Ministry of Social Development and the police are said to work together to implement accessible infrastructure legislation; these laws supposedly guarantee that all public institutions, including archives, have adequate physical accommodation such as ramps and signage. A number of participants also pointed to the State Financial and Administrative Audit Authority as a key agency responsible for overseeing respect for accessibility legislation (A4), (A6). The sanctioning authority is important to ensure that public institutions are being held accountable for the implementation of laws that guarantee persons with disabilities their rights.

Finally, in-house audit committees within ministries and government institutions were identified as respondents. Each of the institutions has a legal and audit department entrusted with the task of ensuring that national regulations are adhered to. Internal oversight units are highly instrumental in the implementation of accessibility legislation, according to respondents, however the extent depends on the institution in question. Some felt that although such units exist, they are not always fully involved, hence, the imbalance between different institutions in applying regulations (A4).

The interviews did, however, reveal several concerns about the overall effectiveness of these oversight bodies. Several participants, for example, remarked that despite such mechanisms, there are still gaps in supervision (A1, A3, A5) are examples. Physical accessibility might be policed to an extent, but there is very little attention being paid to the digital accessibility of archives. Although some institutions promise to take care of physical accessibility, the same institutions were failing miserably in their duty to provide accessible digital platforms for persons with disability. In this case, disparities in enforcement, in addition to lenient penalties, create unequal access to archives in Oman.

The documentary analysis and interviews confirm that different oversight bodies are embedded in the Ministry of Social Development, the State Financial and Administrative Audit Authority, and in internal oversight units within ministries charged with overseeing the full range of accessibility regulations, including those impacting access to archives. Yet, these mechanisms are applied very unevenly, and there is an important gap in the supervision of digital accessibility. Where minimum standards are prescribed, effective enforcement mechanisms with clear-cut penalties for non-compliance are needed to ensure that all archival institutions meet these standards. This would facilitate the translation of regulations from paper to practice to guarantee equal access by persons with disabilities to all physical and digital archives.

Methods of Implementing Regulations

Public institutions, and in this context archives, are typically bound to apply the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008, and standards laid down by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Oman signed in 2008. In order to give effect to these provisions, Oman established a number of mechanisms and practices dealing with ensuring physical access to archives by installing ramps, Braille signage, and any other adaptations that may be considered necessary. Documentary analysis indicates, however, that implementation is not uniform across all institutions. Some organizations are doing quite well in terms of physical accessibility, while there are significant lapses in terms of digital accessibility. Most of the archives in Oman have not taken any steps to make their websites or other digital interfaces compatible according to standards meant for persons with visual or auditory impairments, as laid down by both international and national regulations.

These regulations are also implemented differently, based on their resources and level of awareness. From the analysis, it emerges that some institutions are more open to the set standards of accessibility, especially concerning physical infrastructure. For instance, rehabilitation centers have been set up to help people with disabilities utilize the same public services as archives. Sometimes,

there is a tendency toward inclusion, as evidenced by the translation of public broadcasts into sign language. However, the non-uniform application of such regulations within institutions, especially in regard to digital archives, is a big challenge. The analysis might have gone further to indicate that the government can increase the mechanisms for enforcement with a view to having the requirements for physical and digital accessibility applied in a uniform manner across all public institutions.

These interviews confirm the findings of the documentary analysis, whereby participants describe the various ways in which accessibility regulations are implemented in Oman. Most of the respondents pointed out that there is a general commitment in Omani society and, indeed, within its public sector to adhere to laws and regulations supporting the rights of persons with disabilities (A4, A6). For instance, several respondents noted that physical adjustments relating to accessibility, like ramps and parking for people with disabilities, are in place in some public institutions, including archives (A2, A4). The rehabilitation centers were also stated to be one of the main initiatives that complement the application of accessibility regulations by helping persons with disabilities to access public services easily, including archives (A1). These centers are also involved in training people with disabilities in how certain services are used.

Interviewees also highlighted that the actual implementation of those regulations has significant variations from one institution to another. In this regard, some respondents said that whereas some institutions do an excellent job in trying to put physical accessibility standards into place, others are less motivated, especially when it comes to digital accessibility. For instance, whilst one participant mentioned the example of Omani television starting sign language interpretation as an inclusive practice, they also highlighted the fact that those efforts were not being extended to digital archives. This speaks volumes about the broader unevenness in implementation on the part of the public sector.

Moreover, interviewees mentioned the general awareness of, and commitment of, institutions to the application of such regulations, which came out as a major concern. Although legally each body has an obligation to meet the standard for accessibility, not all show the same motivation in terms of putting such measures into practice; thus, disparities in accessing archives by persons with disability arise. Several of those surveyed pointed out with disgruntlement that, while physical changes have been made in some cases, little accommodation seems to have been made with digital systems. They noted that websites and other digital platforms used by archival institutions are usually not designed to be accessible, hence putting those living with disabilities in a disadvantageous situation to access web-based information.

Besides physical and digital accessibility, interviewees specified other ways such laws have been implemented. For example, one of the interviewees highlighted that Omani legislation promotes equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and others in the sphere of education and work, therefore indirectly contributing to access to archives. Others mentioned rehabilitation centers and assistive technologies, as significant in promoting access of persons with disabilities to archival resources, though such services are not yet widely available.

The findings from the documentary analysis and interviews provide evidence that, indeed, Oman recognises accessibility regulations, but their implementation is inconsistent. At a physical level, improvements are easier to notice, while there is a big gap regarding digital accessibility. It follows from the interviews that some institutions are more proactive than others in terms of compliance, but inconsistent enforcement and lack of awareness on the part of certain public bodies create unequal access to archives for persons with disabilities. The findings indicate that Oman needs to enhance the methods of implementing these laws, especially by enforcing digital accessibility and creating awareness among public institutions about their responsibilities under national and international law.

Legislation and Policies on Archives Accessibility

The documentary analysis of milestones in the Oman's journey in improving accessibility to archives for persons with disabilities through legislation and policy identifies the basic principal legislation, such as the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008, which assures persons with disabilities a wide range of rights, including access to public services related to archives. This law represents a basic step towards ensuring that persons with disabilities have some legislative mechanism on the basis of which they can demand equal access. Besides this, Oman's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities gives a deeper feeling of the country's commitment to meeting the minimum international standards regarding accessibility. These legal frameworks have driven changes both in physical and digital infrastructure, even though those the latter has been much slower.

It also points to efforts by the National Archives and Records Authority to make its structure and services more accessible to citizens with disabilities. Generally, physical accommodations in some archival institutions include ramps, elevators, Braille signage, signs in Braille, and adapted bathrooms. Accessible digital systems have only just begun to be included. The other achievement is the participation of Oman in various regional initiatives, such as the Unified Law for the GCC countries concerning the rights of persons with disabilities. This kind of regional collaboration has assisted in bringing about harmony in policies and the sharing best practice on accessibility issues within the GCC. Whilst these are indeed major legislative and policy milestones, the documentary analysis highlighted that there is still a considerable gap on how far digital accessibility has been achieved in all archival platforms.

This is corroborated by the interviews, with some specific examples of progress being mentioned by participants. Several interviewees acknowledged that Oman has made quite significant strides in improving access to archives through legislative changes. In fact, they say it is a major achievement that persons with disabilities were provided with opportunities for education and employment, which indirectly supports their ability to access archives. They also mentioned that the government has ensured that persons with disabilities can receive educational and career opportunities. Some such individuals have successfully completed training programs in archiving services, representing increased accessibility of archiving institution professional engagement opportunities to persons with disabilities.

Other successes participants reported relate to progress on accessibility features for digital platforms, which nevertheless remains incomplete. Some of the interviewees pointed out examples, such as screen readers and simplified navigation on public websites, which have already been implemented in archival institutions, though they are not widespread. One respondent noted quickly that Braille options, voiceover on some digital platforms, are but the beginning in making digital access inclusive. At the same time, interviewees indicated that such successes remain narrow and that further efforts are required for all archival websites to meet modern standards of accessibility.

While speaking about physical infrastructure, most of the respondents talked about developing buildings and services that are more accessible. Ramps and vehicles that can transport persons with disabilities are now allowed inside public institutions and some archival buildings. According to one interviewee, specific institutions have gone out of their way to install accessible infrastructure in their building through elevators with audio assistance and Braille signs allowing better access to archival resources. These developments, among others, have been referred to as an indication of the commitment of Oman to improving access to physical spaces for people with disabilities.

The active involvement of Oman in regional cooperation, particularly the Unified Law for GCC countries, was another important achievement brought out by the participants. The unified law intends to standardize policies and practices within the region, making the member states on a par with each other and giving importance to accessibility within public services. The reason being, this would bring the nations of the Gulf together in such a manner to show best practices and keep Oman current with international standards on disability rights and access. This regional initiative

lays out a framework for ongoing improvements and ensures that the Sultanate of Oman keeps learning from the successes of its neighbors.

The interviewees underlined that even such achievements are not synonymous with much being done, especially regarding digital accessibility. They commented that this is a policy that is easy to declare, but that its implementation may be very unequal. Some institutions might be just beginning to insert accessibility features into their documents and pages, whereas others lag far behind. One participant even pointed out that most adaptations up to this date have been physical and that most digital platforms, especially those from archival institutions, remain for the most part inaccessible to people with disabilities. This would then suggest that Oman indeed has put up a very accommodating legal framework, but that the implementation of such policies is still inconsistent, especially in the digital world.

The results of the documentary analysis show, and the interviews highlight, impressive achievements on the part of Oman's legislature, and policies to increase access to archives for persons with disabilities. Such legislation includes the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities dated 2008, the ratification of Oman to the CRPD, and participation in various regional initiatives such as the GCC Unified Law. Second, the adaptation of physical infrastructure and the beginnings of adapting to digital accessibility bear witness to Oman's commitment to inclusivity. At the same time, however, the interviews reveal that while progress has been made, especially in physical accessibility, digital access remains a challenge, and continued efforts are necessary to ensure full accessibility in both physical and digital archival platforms according to standards that provide equal access to information for all citizens.

Challenges in Implementing Regulations

The documentary research underlined various issues of great importance concerning regulations for access to archives, for persons with disabilities in Oman. The most serious barrier lies in the fact that the legal framework is very complex in itself. Although Oman has implemented laws such as the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008, and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all these are not easy to put into practice. These are complex regulations, and interpretation and implementation may sometimes be difficult, particularly with regard to the varied needs of persons with disabilities on physical, sensory, and cognitive levels. The complexity of the legislation allows for inconsistent application across institutional contexts; for example, several organizations can adhere closely with standards of accessibility, while others are not able to even achieve the most basic level of accessibility.

The second important challenge derived from the documentary analysis is the lack of specific guidelines or legislation that focuses exclusively on the accessibility issues in archives. Although there exists general legislation with regard to disability rights, there is no clear framework that controls access to archives; this is even more urgent for the digital area of archival resources. The lack of any clear legal frameworks leaves room for variable interpretations and uneven implementations. In cases dealing with digital archives, absence of access features such as screen readers or adaptable interfaces continues to marginalize these people. The foregoing examination shows that the goals of inclusivity and equal access to information by all citizens will hardly be achieved by Oman, through ambiguous and non-archive specific regulations.

The documentary analysis also refers to insufficient mechanisms of oversight and monitoring as one of the key obstacles for poor implementation. As much as oversight bodies such as the Ministry of Social Development and the State Financial and Administrative Audit Authority are entrusted with ensuring compliance, the practice of monitoring institutions is often incomplete. This weak enforcement, with light penalties for non-implementation, contributes to many public institutions—archives included—not taking access measures seriously. This has caused a situation in which some archives are relatively compliant whilst others are unreachable for persons with

disabilities. The analysis concludes that tighter oversight mechanisms and better-defined enforcement procedures would end these implementation gaps.

These challenges were further elaborated through the interviews, where the participants expressed frustration over a number of key issues that prevent the successful execution of accessibility legislation. Most of the respondents mentioned that the intricacy of the laws is creating formidable barriers to understanding and applying these laws efficiently. One of the interviewees (A6), made a broad statement that it has become an issue to interpret the regulations since the very nature of disability is diverse; therefore, different kinds of impairments would require different arrangements, which the present laws do not state with crystal clarity. Lack of clarity creates obstacles for institutions to disseminate a standard use of accessibility, which caused discrepancies in compliance on different levels within archival institutions.

Other barriers mentioned by the respondents include a lack of clear, targeted legislation aimed at improving access to archives (A3; A6). Whilst the general legal framework favors the rights of disabled persons, it does not provide clear directives to ensure that archival records are fully accessible, especially in digital formats. One respondent observed that "nothing clear guides us on how to improve access to archives" (A6), which is the general feeling shared by most participants. In the absence of any clearly framed policy for archives, it is still tough to make archival resources accessible enough, not to mention digital platforms, which remain altogether inaccessible to persons with visual or auditory impairments.

Another significant challenge emerging from the participants' accounts is that there are uneven practices across institutions in relation to guidelines. Whilst a few institutions have been able to incorporate physical accessibility into the mainstream, a lot of institutions are still behind in this respect, especially when it comes to digital accessibility. Participants cautioned about a general lack of institutional motivation to take proactive steps to handle these issues. For example, one interviewee remarked that some institutions are not interested in persons with disabilities and, for that reason, they make only minimal efforts to implement the regulations on accessibility. This level of commitment is worsened by the fact that some institutions face very negligible or no sanctions at all for not taking action. In the absence of meaningful penalties or effective sanctions, there are instances when some institutions carry on with their activities without fully observing the legal stipulations concerning accessibility.

Other respondents pointed to implementation not being enabled due to relevant cultural and institutional attitudes. As one respondent explained, although there is a general feeling in Omani society that persons with disabilities deserve goodwill, it does not follow that institutional behavior will change accordingly. He said, "Goodwill alone is not enough," which suggests that there needs to be more than goodwill to deliver change in relation to legal and institutional compliance. It indicates that there is some sort of incongruence between cultural goodwill to accommodate persons with disabilities and taking concrete steps to achieve complete implementation of accessibility regulations.

Another barrier that was raised during the interviews was the lack of unawareness and training of archivists and other professionals in public institutions. Most respondents noted the dire need to sensitize their staff regarding persons with disabilities and how to handle such situations through assistive technologies. For instance, one participant commented that "most professionals lack knowledge on how to support people with disabilities properly," thus making access to archival resources even harder. Again, the need for training and awareness campaigns was repeated in responses with the suggestion that better-informed staff would apply accessibility standards more uniformly across archival institutions.

Both the interviews and documentary analysis pinpoint several challenges that affect the actual realization of regulations concerning accessing archives by persons with disabilities. These challenges involve everything from the complexity of the legal framework right down to the

particular lack of regulations dealing with archives, having inadequate oversight, and inconsistent implementation of measures on accessibility across institutions. The interviews also emphasize that institutional commitment, cultural attitudes, and personnel training are all crucial in overcoming these. To address the issues mentioned above, Oman still needs to work out a better regulatory framework and introduce clearer guidelines regarding archives and enhancement of oversight and enforcement mechanisms that would ensure all public institutions comply with their commitments concerning accessible services for persons with disabilities.

Discussion of Results

Both interview-based and documentary-based analyses pointed to large gaps between the legal framework and its implementation in terms of accessibility to archives for persons with disabilities in Oman. Whilst marked successes were observed, especially in physical accessibility and regional cooperation, barriers were very much at play, particularly in digital accessibility and the consistent application of laws. Apparently, stronger oversight, clearer regulations, and lessons from international best practice are the means needed to bridge these gaps so equal access by all can be guaranteed.

Overview of National Regulations and Legal Frameworks

Oman has made laudable progress in developing a legal framework for the rights of persons with disabilities through the enactment of its Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, followed by signing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These laws show a praiseworthy intent by governments to meet international standards allowing access to public services, such as archives, to everyone. Yet, as in many countries, there exists a huge gap between this legislation and its proper application.

Similar problems have been faced internationally. For instance, Trevisan and Cogburn (2020) indicate that even in developed countries, which have substantiated legal frameworks like Canada's AODA, actual enforcement is very inconsistent. In the same line, the experience of Oman flows from the fact that whereas these legal frameworks do exist, the application of such regulations is especially uneven within archival institutions. The literature also points to the lack of specific clear regulations regarding archives, a situation shared with many other countries. On her part, Čavkoska (2018) emphasizes that detailed, sectoral regulations are needed in order to fill the gap between general laws about disability and actually enabling access to public services, such as archives.

Interviewees in Oman corroborated this mismatch between regulation and practice. They said that though some of the archives have adapted physical infrastructure, there is no special legal framework guiding digital accessibility of archival resources. This is a serious issue since digital access is now becoming crucial in an effort to gain inclusivity in particular for persons with impairments of either a visual or auditory nature. As no specific archival guidelines are given in Oman, these institutions interpret broader disability laws in a way that results in uneven levels of access.

Oversight Bodies and Mechanisms for Compliance

The findings indicated that multiple oversight bodies in Oman, including the Ministry of Social Development and the State Financial and Administrative Audit Authority, enforce accessibility regulations through different mechanisms. However, it was established that the bodies do not monitor all aspects of accessibility consistently, especially in the digital domain. It is this incomplete oversight that further creates an uneven implementation of the regulations across all public institutions.

The finding also agree with international findings. For example, Lazar and Wentz (2012) note that weak enforcement mechanisms often hamper progress towards accessibility, even in those

countries where the laws are strong. Similarly, Stewart and Dean (2021) observe that even in the Caribbean, where the regulatory frameworks are relatively strong, oversight remains low, securing very limited enforcement and hardly any consequences for those that fail to comply. What is happening in Oman reflects those global challenges when some institutions do not take up their required commitments because of a lack of strong penalties or sanctions.

The interviews conducted showed that whilst oversight bodies exist, their effectiveness is constrained due to limited resources and lack of regular monitoring, particularly in terms of digital accessibility. This is in line with what was established by Jaeger et al. (2015), who argue that, without significant oversight and enforcement mechanisms in place, even well-designed laws cannot be expected to realize full or thorough implementation. For its part, Oman certainly does no better, with several interviewees pointing to frustration that digital platforms-what for most would constitute an essential component of modern archival access-are almost never attended to by regulatory bodies.

Means of enactments regulations

Oman has adopted a set of ways of enhancing the accessibility of the archives. Physical adjustments include ramps and Braille signage. However, the results indicate extreme inconsistency in how the regulations are implemented, especially in terms of digital access. Whereas some institutions have forged well ahead, others lag behind often due to a lack of awareness or resources, or from a lack of institutional commitment.

This is not unique to Oman. Works like Brilmyer (2020) and Malley (2021) demonstrate that accessibility regulations are far from uniformly implemented on an international level. In archives, there is still much to be achieved at grass root level, particularly with regard to digital accessibility. Similar notions are shared by Oman, whereby interviewees have mentioned that even though accessibility is being provided in some instances on a physical level, the idea of accessibility on digital platforms remains very closed off to people with disabilities. The interviews also showed that other institutions do not consider issues of accessibility to be important, which underlines the general lack of institutional motivation. That corroborates the view expressed by O'Sullivan and Alexander (2020), who say that without active and enthusiastic leadership with a commitment to inclusivity, accessibility will continue to move at an extremely slow pace.

Moreover, the confusion in implementing such guidelines, none of which have been targeted to the specific needs of archives, adds further complications. The reviewed literature underlines the use of sector-specific regulations in order to ensure that application would not vary from one institution to another (Brilmyer, 2022; Vlasenko, 2022). In this context, one could note that Oman should develop detailed guidelines that would address both physical and digital accessibility in archives, ensuring the same standards for all institutions.

Legislation and Policies on Access to Archives - Achievements

The Sultanate of Oman has been quite proactive in terms of access to archives, with legislative reforms and regional cooperation relating to people who have disabilities. The Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2008, and Oman's ratification of the CRPD provide a legal grounding for participation in regional initiatives, such as the Unified Law for GCC Countries, which favors a normalization of policy across the Gulf. Other excellent achievements include the adaptation of physical infrastructure in some archival institutions, such as the placing of ramps and Braille signage.

Results show, however, that digital accessibility is where Oman is furthest behind. This further corroborates Martínez and Pluke (2013) in areas of digital inclusion in public services and, more particularly, within the archives themselves. Whilst interviews emphasize more physical adaptations, digital platforms remain unreachable, much like what is experienced in many other countries. Digital exclusion, for instance, has remained a major stumbling block in the access of information

from archival platforms among persons with disabilities despite the advancements that have occurred in physical accessibility, as Malley (2021) observes.

Some of the interviewees also shared that Oman has been trying to develop ease of access to digital platforms, with the inclusion of screen readers in some institutions and options for simplified navigation. These are still at a nascent stage, though, and not widespread. Similarly, evidence from around the world shows that most countries have started to integrate mechanisms for digital accessibility but are unable to fully implement relevant policies. Furthermore, even as Oman continues with engagement in the broader regional initiative of the "Unified Law for GCC Countries," presenting opportunities for learning and betterment, much targeted activity remains to be done on digital access.

Challenges in implementing regulations

These are big challenges facing Oman in implementing regulations on accessibility, with particular emphasis on digital access and its consistent enforcement. The identified main issues of the study revolved around the complexity of the legal framework and the lack of specific regulations for archives. Indeed, this is a problem reflected the world over, as pointed out by Čavkoska (2018), who says that without clear, sectoral regulations, implementation and enforcement can be very inconsistent and difficult to work with.

The interviews also emphasized cultural and institutional barriers to implementation, where some respondents felt that there is goodwill towards accommodating persons with disabilities, but this rarely gets translated into concrete institutional actions. This finding corresponds to Brilmyer (2022) and Vlasenko (2022), who contend that societal attitudes about disability can impact how accessibility regulations get enforced in archives. Other barriers to progress in Oman are related to institutional commitment and lack of awareness among professionals.

In addition, the study found that Oman has done little, so far, to learn from international best practice in order to enhance their efforts into ensuring access. In fact, Čavkoska (2018) and Stewart and Dean (2021) have highlighted cross-national learning as one of the most important preconditions for overcoming the challenges of implementing accessibility regulations. Oman participates in regional initiatives such as the Unified Law for GCC Countries, but the country could learn much from the experiences of countries from the wider region with more advanced digital accessibility strategies, such as European and North American nations.

Oman has indeed taken huge steps toward a legal framework that guarantees the accessibility of archives through physical adaptations and regional cooperation. However, there are still significant challenges to be addressed—particularly those related to digital accessibility and consistent implementation of regulations. As the literature has shown, these are not problems solely experienced by Oman, as many countries seem to struggle with the gap that exists between policy and practice. Moving forward, Oman's next steps will be to enhance regulatory enforcement, ensure full digital access by integrating assistive technologies, and increase the number of public officials and archivists trained on the needs of persons with disabilities. It is only by learning from international best practice that these challenges can be overcome to give equal access to archival information for all citizens.

Recommendations

In comparing Oman's situation with international experiences, it is evident that the country shares common challenges with others in aligning regulatory frameworks with the practical needs of disabled individuals in both physical and digital environments. Drawing on international best practice, such as the integration of AI to enhance digital archival accessibility in countries like Canada and across Europe, provides valuable models that Oman can adapt to address its gaps. Looking forward, Oman's efforts should focus on several key areas:

- Improving digital access through assistive technologies, such as screen readers and accessible formats.
- Strengthening oversight mechanisms to ensure consistent enforcement of accessibility regulations across all institutions.
- Providing continuous training and awareness programs for archival staff to better understand and meet the needs of persons with disabilities.
- Conducting a comprehensive review of current regulations to align with technological advancements and evolving user needs.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the accessibility of archives for persons with disabilities in Oman, focusing on national regulations, legal frameworks, and the mechanisms in place to monitor compliance. Whilst significant progress has been made, particularly in enhancing physical infrastructure, there are still substantial gaps in digital accessibility and the consistent enforcement of regulations. Oman has laid a solid legal foundation with frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2008) and its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). However, the uneven enforcement of these laws—coupled with a lack of rigor in monitoring mechanisms—has led to inconsistent application across institutions. While some organizations, like the National Archives and Records Authority, have spearheaded efforts to improve accessibility, especially through regional legislative reforms such as the Gulf Unified Law, challenges remain in digital infrastructure and the professional development of archivists. By adopting the study recommendations, Oman can not only address existing gaps but also position itself as a regional leader in providing inclusive access to archival resources, ensuring that historical memory is accessible to all members of society, regardless of their abilities.

References

- Brilmyer, G. (2022a). "They Weren't Necessarily Designed with Lived Experiences of Disability in Mind" The Effect of Archival In/Accessibility and "Emotionally Expensive" Spatial Un/Belonging. *Archivaria*, (94), 120-153. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1094878ar>
- Brilmyer, G. M. (2020). "It could have been us in a different moment. It still is us in many ways": community identification and the violence of archival representation of disability. In *Sustainable Digital Communities: 15th International Conference, iConference 2020, Borås, Sweden, March 23–26, 2020, Proceedings 15* (pp. 480-486). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43687-2_38
- Brilmyer, G. M. (2022). "I'm also prepared to not find me. It's great when I do, but it doesn't hurt if I don't": crip time and anticipatory erasure for disabled archival users. *Archival Science*, 22(2), 167-188. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09372-1>
- Čavkoska, B. (2018). Sustainable development and the social inclusion of disabled people. *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, 21(2), 253-260. <https://doi.org/10.5771/1435-2869-2018-2-103>
- Guide of services and facilities for people with disabilities*. (2023). Retrieved March 13, 2024, from <https://portal.mosd.gov.om/webcenter/content/conn/WebCenterSpaces-ucm/path/Enterprise%20Libraries/MOSDEExternalPortal/MinistrySectors/Personswithdisabilities/ar/3bookdesign.pdf>
- ICT Accessibility: Oman Well-positioned to Continue Playing a Leading Role*. (2018, February 11). Anwaar. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from <https://anwaar.squ.edu.om/Post/Post-Detail/ArticleID/73/ICT-Accessibility-Oman-Well-positioned-to-Continue-Playing-a-Leading-Role>
- Jaeger, P. T., Wentz, B., & Bertot, J. C. (2015). Accessibility, inclusion, and the roles of libraries. In *Accessibility for persons with disabilities and the inclusive future of libraries* (pp. 1-8). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

- Khalil, M., & Nasr, E. (2021). The development of legal framework for the management of World Heritage Sites in Oman: a case study on Bahla Oasis. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCHMSD-07-2020-0106>.
- Lazar, J. & Wentz, B. (2012). Ensuring Accessibility for People with Disabilities. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-391063-9.00044-4>
- Lawson, A. (2014). Accessibility Obligations in the un Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Nyusti & Takacs V Hungary. *South African Journal on Human Rights*, 30, 380 - 392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19962126.2014.11865114>.
- Malley, B. (2021). Documenting Disability History in Western Pennsylvania. *The American Archivist*, 84(1), 13-31. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.1.13>
- Martínez, L., & Pluke, M. (2013). Mandate M 376: New Software Accessibility Requirements. , 271-280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2014.02.030>.
- Nindya, I., Elya, R., Dwi Wahyuni. & Rina, Rakhmawati. (2022). Accessibility of Archival Reference Services. *Record and Library Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.20473/rlj.v8-i2.2022.199-206>
- O'Sullivan, K. M., & Alexander, G. (2020). Toward inclusive outreach: What special collections can learn from disability studies. *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 21(1), 11.
- Pal, J., Vallauri, U., & Tsaran, V. (2011). Low-cost assistive technology in the developing world: a research agenda for information schools. *Proceedings of the 2011 iConference*, 459-465. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1940761.1940824>
- Salcedo, D. A., Oliveira, D. D., & Santos, T. D. N. (2014). Acesso e dispositivos legais na gestão de informações arquivísticas. *Ágora*, 24(49), 79-100.
- Small, R. V., Myhill, W. N., & Herring-Harrington, L. (2015). Developing accessible libraries and inclusive librarians in the 21st century: Examples from practice. *Advances in Librarianship*, 73-88. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s0065-28302015000040013>
- Stewart, P., & Dean, M. (2021). Commonwealth Caribbean Disability Access Policies: Access to Educational Institutions and Libraries. *IASL Annual Conference Proceedings*. <https://doi.org/10.29173/iasl8292>.
- Trevisan, F., & Cogburn, D. L. (2020). Technology and accessibility in global governance and human rights: the experience of disability rights advocates. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 18(3), 377-391.
- Vlasenko, S. (2022). Legislative Regulation of access to documents of the National Archival Fund as a component of the state policy of National Memory in Ukraine. *Electronic Scientific Publication "Public Administration and National Security"*, (8(30)). <https://doi.org/10.25313/2617-572x-2022-8-8482>