

Responsible Return to Work: A Case Study of Workers with Acquired Disability in Remote Plantations

Workers with Acquired Disability in Remote Plantations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how return-to-work practices are implemented for workers with acquired disabilities following work-related accidents in a remote plantation setting in Indonesia. It explores how return-to-work responsibility is enacted at the workplace level and whether existing practices align with the principles of responsible return to work in labor-intensive, geographically isolated settings. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with injured workers and organizational actors, supported by workplace observations. Data were analyzed thematically using the responsible return to work framework, which encompasses legal, economic, moral, and discretionary dimensions. The findings show that return-to-work is primarily implemented as employment retention rather than meaningful reintegration. Legal and economic responsibilities emphasize procedural compliance and income continuity, while moral responsibility is framed through organizational care that often takes a paternalistic form. Discretionary responsibility is largely exercised by supervisors, leading to uneven outcomes shaped by managerial judgment and operational constraints. The study positions return-to-work as an organizational and industrial relations process influenced by power dynamics and contextual limitations, demonstrating how fragmented responsibility constrains dignity, participation, and sustainable work trajectories.

Keywords: *Acquired Disabilities, Discretionary Responsibility, Plantation Workers, Responsible Return to Work, Return-to-Work.*

INTRODUCTION

Work-related accidents remain a persistent challenge in Indonesia, particularly in labor-intensive sectors such as agriculture and plantations. Data from Indonesia's Employment Social Security Agency show that reported occupational accidents increased from 221,740 cases in 2020 to 297,725 cases in 2022. Plantation, forestry, and fisheries sectors employing more than 40 million workers are among the most affected due to physically demanding tasks, exposure to hazardous substances, and high safety risks, making work-related injuries and long-term disabilities a recurring issue rather than an exception. The consequences extend beyond physical harm, as injured workers often experience long-term functional limitations, income instability, and disruptions to family livelihoods, especially when they are the primary breadwinner (Beardwood et al., 2005; Schur et al., 2020). For organizations, workplace accidents also lead to medical and compensation costs, productivity loss, skills erosion, workforce instability, and reputational risks. In remote plantation settings, where companies often function as both

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employers and community anchors, losing employment due to injury may also mean losing access to housing, healthcare, and social networks within the plantation ecosystem (ILO, 2022).

Recognizing these challenges, Indonesia has introduced a national Return-to-Work (RTW) program through Ministerial Regulation Number 10 of 2016, administered by Indonesia's Employment Social Security Agency. The program supports injured workers through medical rehabilitation, vocational training, and job placement, aiming to restore their productive capacity and facilitate reintegration into employment. In policy terms, RTW is framed as a coordinated institutional process involving employers, healthcare providers, training institutions, and social security administrators, aligning with global RTW policy frameworks. However, many studies and policy evaluations treat RTW primarily as a technical or administrative mechanism focused on procedures, eligibility criteria, and program outcomes, with limited attention to its implementation at the workplace level, particularly in geographically remote areas where access to state institutions and support services is constrained (Tjulin et al., 2011).

In such contexts, organizational actors, especially direct supervisors, often exercise significant discretion in determining whether and how injured workers return to work, making RTW less a standardized institutional process and more a negotiated managerial practice (Aust et al., 2020). Furthermore, although RTW policies aim to prevent labor market exclusion, returning to work does not necessarily ensure meaningful or dignified employment (Schur et al., 2013). Injured workers may remain employed but be placed in marginal roles, excluded from decision-making, or assigned tasks that do not recognize their remaining capacities, limiting their agency and long-term employability (Beardwood et al., 2005; Schur et al., 2020).

To address this issue, this study adopts a Responsible Return to Work (RRTW) perspective, which conceptualizes return to work as a multidimensional organizational responsibility encompassing legal, economic, moral, and discretionary dimensions (Carroll, 1979; Branicki et al., 2021). Rather than treating RTW solely as an administrative or medical process, this framework emphasizes how responsibility is enacted through managerial practices, organizational norms, and workplace decision-making, particularly in labor-intensive and remote contexts where institutional support is limited, and outcomes are shaped by local practices and power relations (De Stefano et al., 2018; Usha & Ramkumar, 2025).

RTW research has largely focused on developed economies and formal organizational settings, leaving limited evidence from developing countries, especially in plantation sectors where disability risks, paternalistic management, and power asymmetries shape employment relations (Beardwood et al., 2005; De Stefano et al., 2018). In addition, managerial perspectives are rarely examined alongside the lived experiences of injured workers, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how RTW practices are negotiated and experienced in workplace contexts.

This study examines return-to-work practices at a large plantation company in a remote area of North Sumatra, Indonesia. Using qualitative interviews with injured workers and management representatives, the study explores how RTW is implemented in practice, how workplace actors such as supervisors and management shape RTW decisions and outcomes, and the extent to which these practices reflect the principles of responsible return to work from the perspectives of both management and injured workers. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical insight into RTW practices in remote plantation settings in a developing-country context. Second, it advances understanding of RTW as a managerial and industrial relations process rather than a purely administrative intervention. Third, it offers a critical assessment of responsible RTW by highlighting tensions among employment retention, managerial discretion, and workers' dignity in post-injury work transitions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Responsible Return to Work

Return to Work (RTW) has traditionally been understood through a medical or vocational rehabilitation lens, where the primary focus lies on restoring an employee's physical capacity and functional ability after injury or illness (Waddell et al., 2008; Knauf & Schultz, 2016). This perspective tends to prioritize clinical recovery and individual readiness, often overlooking the broader organizational and social context in which the return occurs. In contrast, more recent academic discussions conceptualize RTW as a multifaceted process that extends beyond medical recovery, involving interactions between organizational structures, workplace culture, and human resource management practices (Tjulin et al., 2011). Within this contemporary view, RTW is seen as a dynamic and socially embedded process that requires ethical consideration and sustainable management approaches to ensure long-term success.

Recent empirical evidence further supports this shift by demonstrating that successful RTW outcomes are not solely determined by an individual's health status but are significantly influenced by workplace-related factors. These include job design, the level of support provided by supervisors, coordination among stakeholders, and the extent to which employees perceive fairness and are involved in decision-making processes (Cancelliere et al., 2020). Building on this perspective, the concept of Responsible Return to Work (RRTW) is grounded in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which frames employer obligations across four key dimensions, namely, legal, economic, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities (Carroll, 1979). RRTW highlights the importance of safeguarding employees' dignity, autonomy, and long-term employability during the reintegration process (Aust et al., 2020). RTW is no longer viewed merely as the act of returning an employee to work, but as a process that must consider how the return is implemented, who benefits from it, and what long-term impacts it generates for both the individual and the organization (Branicki et al., 2021).

Legal Dimension

The legal dimension in RRTW provides the baseline for employers, mandating compliance with laws and regulations governing employment, occupational injury/illness management, anti-discrimination, and work adjustments (Carroll, 1979; Branicki et al., 2021). The legal framework for RRTW is enshrined in international human rights instruments, most notably Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This reaffirms the right of individuals to work on an equal basis with others (Schäfer et al., 2024). The International Labor Organization (ILO) further reinforces this legal dimension through standards such as Convention Number 159, which requires member states to develop and periodically review national policies on vocational rehabilitation and employment for persons with disabilities (ILO, 2015). Indonesia's legal approach to disability has shifted from a charity-based view to a rights-based framework following its ratification of the UNCRPD. This shift is reflected in Law Number 8 of 2016, which recognizes persons with disabilities as rights-holders entitled to equal employment. It is operationalized through Ministerial Regulation Number 10 of 2016, which formalizes Indonesia's Employment Social Security Agency return-to-work program as a coordinated institutional process (Kurnianto et al., 2023).

A primary mechanism within the legal dimension is the prohibition of unlawful dismissal, alongside the right to be registered in national civil registration systems as a prerequisite for accessing disability-related social protection. However, Indonesia's RTW policy remains largely silent on the quality of post-return employment. Although the regulation allows job reassignment and vocational training, it does not specify standards for job quality, career progression, or protection against marginalization. As a result, RTW in practice often focuses on maintaining employment status rather than ensuring dignified, sustainable, and inclusive working conditions, leading employers to treat RRTW primarily as an administrative task rather than a long-term reintegration strategy (Etuknwa et al., 2019; Suharto, 2020; Tjandraningsih & Nugroho, 2021).

Economic Dimension

The economic dimension presents RTW as a rational, mutually beneficial business decision that helps retain skilled labor and reduce turnover-related costs and lost productivity (Strijbos et al., 2025). In this sense, an inclusive work environment is necessary to enable workers with disabilities to contribute within the organization (Anuar et al., 2025). For individuals, the economic dimension is often a primary driver of returning to work, yet financial instability can also hinder recovery. Concerns about declining income can undermine an employee's motivation to focus on rehabilitation, thereby delaying the overall process (Huijts et al., 2015; Larsson et al., 2022). For companies, work disability imposes a substantial financial burden on national economies and certain industrial sectors (Cancelliere et al., 2016). These costs stem from a combination of workers' compensation payments and lost productivity (Sharpe et al., 2022). Beyond the firm, disability strains regional and national economies as the costs of sickness absence rise annually, leading to increased utilization of health services and disability pensions (Temizkan et al., 2024).

Responsible RTW requires viewing employees as essential human capital rather than a liability to be managed (Philpot & Gavrilova, 2021). Organizations fulfil their economic responsibility by identifying opportunities where RTW benefits the bottom line, such as retaining valued, experienced employees and maintaining morale (Branicki et al., 2021; Sharpe et al., 2022). A major critique of the economic dimension is the cost-benefit tension inherent in management decisions. Employers may feel pressure to return key personnel quickly to maintain productivity, which can conflict with employees' need for medically necessary recovery time (Kurnianto et al., 2023). Furthermore, although RTW coordination is effective, employers often find these programs costly to implement, leading to situations in which safety and reintegration efforts are carried out only during audits rather than as part of a sustained organizational culture (Libraswulan, 2014; MacEachen et al., 2020).

Moral and Discretionary Dimensions

The Moral Dimension of Responsible Return to Work (RRTW) shifts the focus from legal compliance to ethical care, emphasizing the need to avoid harm and meet employees' normative expectations (Branicki et al., 2021; Moldvik et al., 2021). Meaningful work contributes to wellbeing by enabling individuals to feel valued and connected to society, and for persons with disabilities, it often represents a process of restoring normalcy and self-esteem (Edgelow et al., 2020; Temizkan et al., 2024). However, returning to work does not automatically ensure meaningful reintegration, as many workers experience a "perseverance loop" marked by concerns about their capacity and job security.

Moral responsibility requires recognizing workers' concerns and providing sufficient "margin of manoeuvre," allowing tasks to be adapted without compromising health (Durand et al., 2014; Coutu et al., 2024). Experiences of actual or perceived injustice increase the risk of non-return to work, making it essential for management to address distress and support smoother transitions (Sullivan et al., 2008; Giummarra et al., 2017). Moral RRTW, therefore, involves not only providing workplace accommodations but also ensuring workers can request them and that employers respond constructively, while actively involving injured workers in RTW planning to support sustainable return and psychological well-being (Rumrill et al., 2023).

Because discretionary support is voluntary, it is often inconsistent, with greater support typically given to highly educated or organizationally critical workers, while casual or low-skilled workers may receive little attention (Hoefsmit et al., 2023; Radford et al., 2024). In the absence of formal structures, RTW can become a "personal lottery," depending on whether a worker has a supportive supervisor (Branicki et al., 2021). Consequently, supervisory attitudes, discretionary authority, and local interpretations of

policy strongly shape whether RTW practices are experienced as supportive or punitive (Tjulin et al., 2011).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how return-to-work practices are implemented for workers who acquire disabilities due to work-related accidents in a remote plantation setting in Indonesia. A qualitative design is appropriate as it explores RTW as a managerial and organizational process shaped by power relations, discretion, and contextual constraints rather than merely as a procedural or medical intervention. The case study enables an in-depth understanding of RTW practices in everyday organizational settings by capturing multiple perspectives within their institutional and geographical contexts. The case was purposively selected as it represents a large-scale plantation in a remote setting, providing a critical context for examining RTW practices in Indonesia.

The research was conducted at a large-scale plantation company in a remote area of Indonesia, characterised by physically demanding work, limited public services, and strong dependence on employer-provided infrastructure. This setting constitutes a critical case where geographical isolation and employer dependency significantly shape RTW implementation. The remote location also constrains access to rehabilitation services, vocational training, and state institutions such as employment and health social security agencies.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to capture participants' experiences of returning to work and adapting to post-injury employment. This method was chosen to ensure flexibility while maintaining consistency across key topics. Data collection was conducted in two phases due to site remoteness. The first phase involved interviews with two managerial staff at the head office, followed by field visits to one processing facility and two plantation areas, where three supervisors and nine workers were interviewed. The second phase, conducted two months later in more distant sites, included interviews with five supervisors and nine workers. This two-phase approach enabled iterative data collection, where initial findings informed subsequent interviews.

In total, the study involved two HR managers, eight supervisors, and eighteen workers with acquired disabilities across six plantation areas and one processing plant. Participants had physical, sensory, and mental health-related conditions resulting from work-related accidents or illnesses. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to capture perspectives across organizational levels, and the sample size was sufficient to reach data saturation. Non-participant observations were also conducted to examine the physical work environment.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis combining inductive and deductive coding. The process involved identifying initial codes, refining categories, and comparing perspectives between workers and organizational actors. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in identifying patterns while accommodating both data-driven and theory-informed interpretation. The findings were interpreted using the responsible return-to-work framework to analyse participation, job quality, managerial discretion, and organizational responsibility. This framework was chosen to capture both worker outcomes and organizational responsibility in RTW processes.

RESULTS

Return-to-Work as Employment Retention without Substantive Reintegration

Across the study sites, RTW was understood and implemented primarily as continued employment following workplace injury or illness. Workers with disabilities consistently reported that they were not dismissed after the injury and remained formally employed by the company. This employment retention was widely recognized by both workers and managers as a key organizational commitment and was embedded in internal regulations and collective agreements. For most workers, RTW began once medical treatment was

completed or compensation procedures finalized. Workers were then reassigned to alternative tasks considered safer or less physically demanding than their previous roles. However, the RTW process rarely involved formal assessment of work capacity, structured rehabilitation planning, or systematic evaluation of job suitability. Reassignment decisions prioritized maintaining employment status rather than facilitating meaningful reintegration into work (Kurnianto et al., 2023).

Workers described RTW as an administrative transition rather than a rehabilitative process. Although employment was secured, post-injury roles were often characterized by limited task variation, reduced responsibility, and minimal opportunities for skill development. Several workers reported that their post-injury positions were initially described as temporary or transitional, yet in practice remained unchanged for extended periods (MacEachen et al., 2010).

One worker (J) had previously served as a member of the plantation's fast-response team responsible for securing plantation areas against theft and other criminal incidents. Following a stroke and three months of medical rehabilitation, he was reassigned to a security position at the plantation office. Although formally categorised as safeguarding duties, the role mainly involved opening doors and welcoming visitors to the office. The reassignment also resulted in a prolonged separation from his former team and social network. From the worker's account, the new role largely consisted of receiving guests and facilitating visits by external parties such as NGOs and other visitors to the plantation office. Management framed the reassignment as a safer and lower-risk task considered more suitable for his post-rehabilitation condition (Beardwood et al., 2005).

A similar experience was reported by another worker (R), who sustained a severe injury to his right eye while working as a rubber extractor. Upon returning to work, he was reassigned by the group leader to an office support role after the previous office assistant had not resumed the position. The new assignment involved relatively light administrative and support tasks within the office environment. The reassignment was accepted as part of the return-to-work arrangement, with the role perceived as less physically demanding than the worker's previous field-based duties. Interviews with management indicated that the organization primarily interpreted its responsibility in terms of retaining injured workers within employment. Compliance with employment protection requirements was therefore prioritized. However, broader considerations such as job quality, long-term career pathways, or capability development were not systematically incorporated into the return-to-work process (Cancelliere et al., 2016).

Return-to-Work Decisions under Cost and Operational Constraints

Economic considerations were a significant factor in shaping RTW practices. Managers and supervisors often framed RTW decisions in terms of operational feasibility, productivity, and cost containment. In remote plantation settings with limited job diversity, reassignment options were constrained by existing work structures and labor demands. Workers who acquired disabilities were typically reassigned to tasks perceived as "lighter," such as monitoring, guarding, cleaning, or assisting. These assignments were often justified by supervisors as necessary to prevent further injury and to ensure that work continued without disrupting production targets. However, such roles were generally associated with lower productivity expectations and limited contribution to core operations (Cancelliere et al., 2016).

The economic implications of RTW were evident in the expectation that workers maintain productivity through self-adaptation after returning to work. One worker (C), who developed a visual impairment following a workplace accident, continued working as a mechanic after his return. The injury occurred while he was voluntarily performing grass trimming, a task outside his formal job responsibilities. After returning, his supervisor assigned tasks that avoided smoke, dust, and heavy lifting to prevent further damage to his eyesight. However, several work activities requiring precise visual coordination, such as climbing stairs and aligning bolts, remained challenging. From his

account, adjustments were limited to task allocation, while much of the adaptation to work activities had to be managed individually (Giummarra et al., 2017).

Training or reskilling opportunities were rarely integrated into the RTW process. Workers described being expected to adjust to their new roles independently, without formal training or modifications to performance expectations. In some cases, workers continued to perform physically demanding tasks because those roles provided higher income, even when they experienced ongoing pain or functional limitations. A similar pattern was observed in the case of worker (T), who developed low vision following a workplace accident. After returning to work, an assignment was given to a monitoring and reporting role involving the recording of pest types and numbers in plantation areas. In the absence of structured training, writing skills were developed independently at home for approximately one month before task completion could be performed confidently. Skill adaptation in this case was largely self-directed rather than supported through formal vocational rehabilitation or structured workplace training. From a managerial perspective, investment in job redesign or vocational rehabilitation was considered difficult to justify due to resource constraints, geographical isolation, and limited access to specialized support services. As a result, RTW practices prioritized immediate work placement over longer-term economic sustainability for workers with acquired disabilities (Kurnianto et al., 2023).

Moral Responsibility and Managerial Discretion in Return-to-Work Practices

The findings indicate that RTW practices were also shaped by a moral framing of responsibility, in which returning injured workers to employment was understood as an expression of organizational care and humanitarian obligation. Managers and supervisors frequently emphasized the importance of ensuring that workers who had acquired disabilities due to work-related accidents were not excluded from employment. Within managerial narratives, the continuation of employment was framed as a form of appreciation for workers' previous dedication and sacrifices for the company. One managerial account highlighted that emotional and humanitarian considerations were taken into account when determining whether injured workers could remain employed, particularly given the limited employment opportunities available in remote plantation areas. This perspective positioned RTW primarily as a moral duty to maintain workers' livelihoods rather than as a negotiated employment process focused on long-term career development or capability enhancement (Branicki et al., 2021).

Within this moral framing, RTW was often portrayed by the organization as an act of benevolence. Workers with acquired disabilities described the opportunity to continue working as something for which they should feel grateful, especially given their reduced physical capacity and the scarcity of alternative employment in the plantation's remote setting. This narrative positioned continued employment as a form of organizational protection rather than empowerment. The emphasis on care and humanitarian responsibility contributed to a workplace culture in which the organization was perceived as providing support by retaining injured workers, even when their roles were reassigned to positions with limited opportunities for advancement (Rumrill et al., 2023).

However, the moral emphasis on care was not consistently accompanied by mechanisms that supported worker participation or voice in the RTW process. Decisions regarding post-return job placement and task allocation were generally made by supervisors or management without extensive deliberation with the workers concerned. As a result, workers were often expected to accept assigned roles as part of the organization's effort to fulfil its perceived responsibility for their situation. In this context, moral responsibility was enacted in ways that maintained employment but also reinforced patterns of dependency, limiting workers' ability to actively shape their post-injury work trajectories (Tjulin et al., 2011).

Workers' accounts further suggested that moral considerations frequently coexisted with a sense of acceptance and resignation regarding future career prospects. One worker with an acquired physical disability (A), who had been employed by the company for

more than three decades, described a long-standing aspiration to work in an office position after years of performing various physically demanding tasks across different plantation operations. Despite this aspiration, such transitions rarely materialized. Other workers expressed even more limited expectations regarding career development. A worker with a visual impairment (M) indicated that educational background and physical limitations were perceived as significant barriers to career advancement within the organization. These accounts suggest that while moral responsibility functioned as a stabilising mechanism that maintained employment and prevented exclusion, it did not necessarily translate into forms of RTW that promoted meaningful reintegration, skill development, or long-term occupational mobility (Knauf & Schultz, 2016).

The discretionary nature of responsible return to work was evident in the central role of supervisors and site-level managers in shaping RTW outcomes. In the absence of detailed Organizational guidelines on post-return job quality, accommodation, and progression, RTW practices were largely determined by individual managerial judgment rather than standardized procedures. Supervisors played a central role in assessing workers' post-injury capabilities, determining appropriate job assignments, and monitoring performance after workers returned to work. In practice, these decisions were often made informally and adapted to local operational conditions, particularly at plantation sites located far from the company's head office. As a result, RTW arrangements tended to vary across plantation units and locations, even among workers with similar disabilities or injury histories. The implementation of RTW, therefore, depended largely on the judgment and discretion of local supervisors who were responsible for managing day-to-day work activities in the field (Tjulin et al., 2009).

Managerial accounts indicated that reassignment decisions were generally based on assessments of the physical demands of plantation work and the workers' functional limitations after injury. Workers who experienced physical impairments were commonly moved to tasks perceived as less physically demanding in order to reduce the risk of further injury. For example, when a worker sustained an injury affecting hand function, harvesting tasks that required handling long tools such as sickles or harvesting hooks were considered no longer suitable. In such cases, workers were reassigned to alternative tasks such as maintenance work, including clearing weeds or performing other supporting activities that required lower levels of physical exertion. While this approach allowed injured workers to remain employed, it also reflected the strong influence of supervisory discretion in shaping RTW practices and determining the types of work available to workers following injury (Cancelliere et al., 2016).

Managers often justified the need for discretion by citing the practical realities of plantation work, such as production targets, safety concerns, and limited task options. Discretion was framed as necessary to balance workers' conditions with operational demands. However, this reliance on discretionary decision-making also led to an uneven distribution of responsibility. While supervisors bore significant responsibility for implementing RTW, there were few mechanisms for organizational oversight, documentation, or evaluation of RTW decisions (Branicki et al., 2021).

From the workers' perspective, discretionary RTW practices created uncertainty and dependence. Workers often saw their post-return work arrangements as contingent on supervisors' attitudes and interpretations rather than on transparent criteria. Some workers reported supportive experiences that allowed gradual adjustment, while others described restrictive task assignments that curtailed autonomy and opportunities to contribute. The lack of clarity about decision-making processes made it difficult for workers to anticipate changes, negotiate arrangements, or challenge outcomes they perceived as unfair. The discretionary dimension highlights how responsibility for RTW became highly individualized and localized within supervisory roles. In remote plantation operations, discretion served as both a practical solution and a source of variability, shaping divergent RTW experiences and reinforcing the absence of a coherent organizational approach to responsible reintegration (Tjulin et al., 2010).

DISCUSSION

The findings show that responsible return to work for workers with acquired disabilities in this remote plantation context operates through four dimensions: legal, economic, moral, and discretionary, but in fragmented and uneven ways. As a result, RTW practices primarily prioritize employment retention and protection while providing limited support for meaningful reintegration, worker participation, and long-term employability. This pattern suggests that RTW may appear procedurally adequate yet remain substantively limited in improving workers' post-injury work trajectories. As noted by Tjulin et al. (2011), RTW literature often conceptualizes return to work as a coordinated reintegration process integrating legal, economic, moral, and organizational responsibility. However, the present findings indicate that in labor-intensive and remote work settings, these dimensions may coexist without strong integration, resulting in RTW practices that maintain employment but do not fully support sustainable reintegration.

Nevala et al. (2020) show that RTW policy frameworks often emphasize procedural compliance rather than post-return job quality or worker participation. In line with this, legal responsibility in the studied context was mainly understood in procedural terms, focusing on compliance with RTW regulations and administrative coordination with social security institutions, which often marked the endpoint of organizational responsibility, particularly in remote plantation areas with limited institutional oversight and rehabilitation access. Meanwhile, Schur et al. (2020) highlight the protective role of job retention in preventing labor market exclusion. Similarly, the economic dimension of RRTW in this study was reflected in the emphasis on employment continuity as a strategy for economic survival. However, in physically demanding plantation work and geographically isolated labor markets, maintaining employment often takes precedence over long-term reintegration, revealing the limitations of retention-based approaches and challenging assumptions in Western RTW models that equate retention with successful return to work.

Moral responsibility was strongly reflected in managerial narratives that framed RTW as an expression of organizational care and humanitarian obligation. This framing aligns with RTW literature highlighting employer goodwill and supportive attitudes as facilitators of return to work, as noted by Tjulin et al. (2010). However, the findings suggest that when not accompanied by mechanisms for worker voice and participation, moral responsibility may take a paternalistic form, positioning workers as recipients of organizational benevolence rather than active participants in shaping their post-injury work trajectories. This observation also reflects concerns in disability studies that forms of care can stabilise employment while constraining workers' agency and aspirations, as discussed by Beardwood et al. (2005).

The discretionary dimension further shows how responsibility for RTW was largely localized within supervisory roles. Although supervisors played a central role in implementation, their role often functioned more as gatekeepers than facilitators, determining job placement and task suitability based on informal assessments of workers' physical capabilities. In the absence of clear organizational standards or accountability mechanisms, RTW arrangements were therefore heavily shaped by supervisory judgment, reflecting broader concerns in sustainable HRM and disability management literature about reliance on managerial discretion without institutional safeguards, as highlighted by Aust et al. (2020).

Across all dimensions, the remote plantation context strongly shaped RTW practices. Geographic isolation, limited rehabilitation access, and workers' dependence on employer-provided employment intensified power asymmetries, resulting in fragmented and individualised RTW responsibility rather than shared organizational and institutional accountability. These conditions reflect broader labour concerns about the vulnerability of workers with disabilities in resource-constrained and geographically isolated settings, as highlighted by ILO (2022). This study contributes to RTW and RRTW literature by providing evidence from a non-Western, labour-intensive, and remote context. Applying the RRTW framework to plantation work highlights the limitations of universal RTW

models and underscores the need for context-sensitive approaches that move beyond procedural compliance and retention-based indicators toward more inclusive and responsible reintegration practices.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that all four dimensions are present but operate in fragmented and uneven ways. In practice, RTW is largely implemented as an employment retention strategy, where legal and economic responsibilities focus on procedural compliance and income continuity to ensure injured workers remain employed. While this approach protects workers from immediate labour market exclusion, it provides limited support for job quality, skill development, or long-term employability, indicating that employment retention does not necessarily lead to meaningful reintegration.

The study also highlights the important role of moral and discretionary responsibilities in shaping workplace practices. RTW is frequently framed by management as an expression of organizational care and humanitarian responsibility, particularly given workers' previous contributions and the scarcity of alternative employment in remote areas. However, RTW decisions are often driven by supervisory discretion, resulting in uneven practices that depend on local managerial judgement rather than consistent organizational standards. These findings suggest that responsibility for RTW in remote plantation contexts tends to be localized and protective in nature, emphasising employment continuity while providing limited opportunities for worker participation and agency.

The study contributes to RTW and RRTW literature by providing empirical evidence from a non-Western, labour-intensive, and geographically remote setting, highlighting the limitations of universal RTW models developed in more institutionalised labour markets. However, the study is limited to a single plantation company and relies primarily on qualitative accounts from workers and supervisors, which may not fully capture broader institutional dynamics. Future research could expand comparative studies across sectors, regions, or organizational contexts and examine how institutional support systems, vocational rehabilitation, and inclusive HR practices can strengthen responsible and sustainable RTW implementation.

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