

The Participation of Persons with Disabilities on the Labor Market in Zimbabwe. A Case of Glenview 1, Riverside, Harare - A Qualitative Research

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Author's Contribution

¹⁻⁴ Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work for the acquisition, analysis or interpretation of data for the work, ¹⁻⁴ Drafting the work or reviewing it critically for important intellectual content, ¹⁻⁴ Final approval of the version to be published, Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Article Info.

Received: March 23, 2025

Acceptance: July 21, 2025

Conflict of Interest: None

Funding Sources: None

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Cite this article as: Magavude T J, Moyo L P N, Ndhlovu E, Kabayahwaro G S. The Participation of Persons with Disabilities on the Labor Market in Zimbabwe. A Case of Glenview 1, Riverside, Harare - A Qualitative Research. JRCRS.2025;13(3):147-152 <https://dx.doi.org/10.53389/JRCRS.2025130305>

A B S T R A C T

Background: This study explored the factors affecting the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market in Zimbabwe. Persons with disabilities continue to face stigma and discrimination in their participation in labour market despite the availability of robust social policy and programs in Zimbabwe. The study therefore aims to establish pathways towards promoting their inclusion in labour market.

Objective: The main objective of the study was to identify the socio-economic factors hindering the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market and to establish strategies to ensure increased participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market.

Methodology: A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing a phenomenological research design to capture the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Purposive sampling, was used to select a total of 13 participants with varying disabilities, as well as 3 key informants. The study conducted semi structured interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes each with 15 open-ended questions and focus group discussions with 8-10 participants gathering insights from persons with disabilities. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with individuals possessing specialized knowledge on the area of study.

Results: from the study were analyzed using a thematic data analysis. The researcher obtained consent from participants before their involvement in the study. All participants were assured of full confidentiality, with the understanding that no information would be revealed without their consent. The study found that attitudinal and physical barriers are major factors affecting the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market. Additionally, resource constraints were found to limit the capacity of communities and employers from accommodating persons with disabilities in the workplace. The study further established that measures to improve participation include vocational training and the establishment of a quota system.

Conclusion: The study recommended among other efforts, the continuous improvement of existing disability-friendly policies and the repeated raising of awareness on the need to include persons with disabilities in the labour market through effective implementation of reasonable accommodations among other efforts.

Keywords: Disability, Labour Market, Persons with disabilities and Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Globally, the labour force participation of persons with disabilities remains contentious. According to the International Labor Organization (2021), labor force participation is calculated by expressing the estimated

number of people in the labour force as a percentage of the working-age population. There are significant variances in labour force participation based on gender, sex, and age. Persons with disabilities, face enduring challenges in participating in the labour market. Research conducted by

the International Labor Organization (ILO) (2021) indicated that people with disabilities are less likely to participate in the labour force compared to their able-bodied counterparts.¹ Internationally, there has been an increasing focus on non-discrimination in the workplace and human rights for persons with disabilities (PWDs).² Despite the significant attention paid to the inclusion of PWDs at national (Zimbabwe) and international (global) levels, discriminatory tendencies in the labour force continue to escalate.

The phenomenon of inclusivity in labour force participation is one of the most complex, rampant and visible problem across the world. Zimbabwe, armed with strong governance institutions and powerful lobbyists and advocacy activists has always fallen short in providing meaningful and enabling environment for a level playing-field on the labour market for persons with disabilities.³ In spite of improvements made through legislations at international and regional levels: the participation rate of persons with disabilities remains significantly low. In Zimbabwe, amendments to the Disability Act are not being prioritized and this compromise participation of PWDs in labour force. As a result, significant number of persons with disabilities are out of both formal and informal employment. According to the 2019 Labour Force and Child Labour Survey, 13% of employed people in Zimbabwe have disabilities. However, only 2% of these are employed in the public sector. The complexity of understanding disability and its dynamics pose an immense challenge in tackling the employability of persons with disabilities. This study is vital in addressing the pressing issue of limited labor market participation of persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe.⁴ By exploring the underlying experiences of persons with disabilities, the study will provide valuable insights into the barriers face and possible effects to their wellbeing. The findings will inform evidence-based policies and interventions to promote inclusive labor market practices and challenge existing biases.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of persons with disabilities regarding their participation in the labor market. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of participants' personal stories and provide more nuanced data that quantitative methods might overlook.⁵ Phenomenological research design was used to explore the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in labor force participation.⁶ asserts that phenomenology design seeks to understand human experiences from the participant's viewpoint.

The research was conducted in Glenview 1, Riverside. The location was chosen because of its proximity to the

researcher and the availability of people with disabilities. The study employed purposive sampling where thirteen participants with disabilities selected for interviews. Key informants were selected for interviews. Four key informants were also purposively selected from the Department of Social Development, Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training, Federation of Organizations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ) and local leadership due to their active involvement in disability inclusion initiatives.

The study conducted semi structured interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes each with 15 open-ended questions. Each participating was engaged in one sitting and conversations were conducted in English and Shona language being chosen based on respondent preference, allowing for in-depth exploration and rich.⁷ The study also conducted focus group discussions with 8-10 participants gathering insights from persons with disabilities. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with individuals possessing specialized knowledge on the area of study.⁸

Data recoded through note taking audio recordings was then analyzed thematically. The process involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data.⁸ Initial codes were generated inductively emerging from the data itself through a process of open coding. This allowed researchers to identify patterns and themes that were grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the participants. To ensure reliability and consistency, two researchers independently coded a subset of the data and then compared their coding schemes.⁹ Emerging discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, ensuring a high level of inter-coder reliability. Themes were validated through triangulation from the following data sources, structured interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. This helped to ensure that the findings were rigorous and reflected the complexities of the research topic.

In the context of this study, thematic analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of the socio-economic, attitudinal, and physical barriers faced by persons with disabilities when attempting to access employment opportunities. NVivo software was used to systematically organize and code the data. Ethical considerations in this study were more central to ensuring the integrity and protection of participants.

The study sought consent from the Ministry of Public Service Labour and Social Welfare. Informed consent was obtained by providing participants with clear information about the study, ensuring voluntary participation. Anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and all personal data was securely stored. Protection from harm was

prioritized by minimizing any physical, emotional, or psychological risks, and support was provided if needed. Freedom from deception was upheld by ensuring transparency, with participants fully understanding the study's purpose and process. These ethical measures ensured the research was conducted responsibly, safeguarding the well-being and rights of participants.

Results

This section presents and analyzes the data that were collected for this research study. The findings were presented in line with the objective of the study, which is to examine the factors associated with the lower rate of labour participation by persons with disabilities and to explore ways of incorporating persons with disabilities in the formal and informal labour sectors. The data was analyzed using qualitative methods, and the findings will be discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Factors associated with the lower rate of labour participation by persons with disabilities

Attitudinal and physical Barriers: Participants who were engaged in this study reflected that attitudinal and physical barriers greatly affected their level of participation in the labour force. The researcher gathered that some persons with disabilities work for long hours without tools that accommodate their functionality at their work places. Participants informed the researcher that some workloads become too high for them due to lack of structures that accommodate persons with disabilities.

In an interview, participant 1 said that

"I am a teacher by profession and I am not able to do all the required duties such as lesson delivery because the work place has tall building and moving up and down to classes is difficult because of my condition. This is caused by lack of reasonable accommodation at my workplace, I expect to see improvements because I am tired of this."

In most cases persons with disabilities are being employed in the formal sector as compared to non-formal sectors basing on their skills. It was further highlighted that among persons with disabilities, only those who possess certain qualifications would have better chances for employment. However, to a person who does not have any form of qualification employment prospects are very low. According to views of the key informants, although persons with disabilities are now being involved in the nonformal sector such as buying and selling, majority are still disadvantaged and rely on charity. The study established that prospective employers in the non-formal sector follow the

medical model of disabilities which associates disability with inability to perform.

Discrimination: The research found that discrimination significantly contributes to the reduced participation of persons with disabilities in the labor force. It was observed that the majority of private sector employers are hesitant to hire persons with disabilities for their workplaces. Responses from a focus group discussion revealed that individuals with disabilities face discrimination in the labor market, even when the nature of their impairments does not hinder their ability to perform essential job functions.

Giving his side of the story, participant 2 had this to say, "If someone is the best candidate and the most qualified candidate, he or she should be hired irrespective of any disability. Every person regardless of disability type should be promoted basing on merit."

Responses from the focus group discussion also revealed that when hired for employment, persons with disabilities had lower chances of promotion as compared to their able-bodied counterparts even possessing the skills and qualifications. It was gathered only few among persons with disabilities are working in executive positions in their work places. Participants alluded that promotion on workplaces are not based on meritocracy as they are not given equal opportunities to promotion with their able-bodied counterparts. Persons with disabilities are discriminated against taking decision making positions as well as exempted performing outdoor activities.

Low self-esteem: Discrimination and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities results in them developing low self-esteem. The study found out that majority of persons with disabilities are less likely to initiate their own projects to raise money. Some persons with disabilities ended up considering themselves as economically ineffective group and thus would no longer make attempts to venture in to labour market. It was gathered that in some instances persons with disabilities do not even contest for political position since their communities have negative attitude towards them.

Participant 3 said that:

"Our colleagues with disabilities ended up developing low self-esteem because communities despise us every day. As people discriminates against persons with disabilities on daily bases and calling them names, some of us ended up developing low self-esteem."

Lack of professional skills: Lack of professional skills was identified as another prominent factor that undermine participation of persons with disabilities in labour force. The study established that persons with disabilities can be employed when they have a profession of some sort. It was

established that whenever both the government and the private sector employs a person with disabilities, the offer goes to only those with professional skill and those without skills remain out of employment. In this regard the research gathered that majority of persons with disabilities lack such professional skill that accommodate them in labour market.

Participant 4 remarked:

"It's actually difficult for a person with disabilities to venture in to employment sector when the person does not have professional skills relevant to that Job. For this reason, you end up seeing majority of persons with disabilities begging in the streets for survival."

Less Cooperation from the private sector: The research identified a gap in the involvement of private sector in considering the plight of persons with disability in the labour market. Participants reported that although the government of Zimbabwe employed a significant number of persons with disabilities, there is small uptake of persons with disabilities in the private sector. (9) The research finds out that persons with disabilities wanted the government to engage the private sector in a meaningful way and make sure that they are also meaningfully involved in the labour market.

Participant 5 has this to say,

"The government should put obligations to ensure that private players come into play to involve persons with disabilities in employment."

Fear of litigation: Employers knew that some of the persons with disabilities now know their rights. For this reason, employers are said to be afraid of litigation against unfair labour practices. Many organizations are not adhering to the provisions of the Labour Act that persons with disabilities needs to be treated fairly providing them reasonable accommodation to fully perform their duties. Participants reported that several private players desist from employing persons with disabilities as they consider it as risking litigation. It is against this background that some organization does not have policies that accommodate persons with disabilities and are so rigid that they do not intend to change or review their policies.

Participant 6 said that:

"In my view many organizations in the city of Harare are not employing persons with disabilities because there are no facilities that accommodate persons with disabilities at their organizations. By so doing they prefer not to employ because they fear litigation owing to their unfair labour practices."

Lack of reasonable accommodation: The research established that majority of organizations particularly private sectors do not have facilities that promotes employment of persons with disabilities. This in turn results in organizations

avoiding employment of persons with disabilities. Participants reported that a sizable number of organizations in Harare does not have reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities thus resulting reduced participation of persons with disabilities in labour market. In many organizations, there are no stringent measures to accommodate persons with disabilities. An example sighted was that majority of office buildings do not have ramps for people using ramps and lack of sign language interpreters for people with speech impairments.

Participant 7 had this to say:

"We are not having jobs because majority of organizations does not have facilities to accommodate persons with disabilities. If you check, quite a number of offices have small doors without ramps. This simply means to say the organization does not employ people who uses wheel chairs."

From the above submissions, participation of persons with disabilities in labour force is somewhat compromised by lack of reasonable accommodation at workplaces. Such exclusions negatively affect participation level of persons with disabilities in general. In this regard, lack of a reasonable accommodation to care for the plight of persons with disabilities has attributed to the development of the social model of disability

Lack of a clear policy framework: It was gathered that unavailability of inclusive labour policies which are disability oriented negatively impact employment of persons with disabilities. Participants urged that many organizations in Zimbabwe does not have comprehensive policies to guide the employment of persons with disabilities. Through in-depth interviewees, the study finds out that absence of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities in majority of organization emanates from lack of policy framework to guide hiring of persons with disabilities. It was also established that there is a lack of vibrant disability movement push for advocacy around employment and policy matters for persons with disabilities.

Lack of Enough Representation: Persons with disabilities often lack enough representation on issues that pertain to inclusivity. This is against the backdrop that there are few persons with disabilities in parliament and politics in general. Even though the government of Zimbabwe established quota system for persons with disabilities in parliament and other political spheres, it was noted that there is still a lack in representation as a smaller percentage of persons with disabilities are found in policy and decision-making positions.⁹ The research established that issues of representation must start at primary and secondary education levels where learners with disabilities should be

considered for student representation position. The study identified this as a stepping stone in boosting self-esteem of persons with disabilities and creating cadres who represents their own right in the field of employment and other sectors.

Competition: The research established that there are low level employment opportunities available to persons with disabilities in the Labour force due to stiff competition in the sector. Participants indicated that in a scenario where an organization recruit people for employment, persons with disabilities do not have equal opportunity to get the position as compared to their able-bodied counterparts. As a way of streamlining candidates, majority of employer's state other skills as added advantages to get employment. Such skills may include, ability to ride a motorbike and ability to drive. The research finds out that such provisions that are given as added advantages of getting a job are also ways in which organizations make use of to shun persons with disabilities out of employment.

It was also gathered that the level of employment opportunities among persons with disabilities is very minimal due to the nature of jobs in the market. There is an influx of persons with disabilities that has been noticed recently in the education sector from primary to secondary level of education. However, few elites with disabilities have transcended this confinement in the education sector and assume other portfolios be it in the Justice Departments, Home Affairs, Agriculture and tourism inter alia. It has also been recognized that majority of persons with disabilities joined the private sector, particularly Civil Society Organizations which deals with the advancement of disability rights and those of other vulnerable groups like orphans and women. The study established that there are less opportunities for persons with disabilities in the informal sector where manual work such as building and carpentry are being done."

One key informant said,

"Looking at the current employment status in Zimbabwe jobs are very scarce in the formal sector. As a result, most of the jobs are found in the informal sector where persons who are physically challenged will find it difficult to participate in the kind of job available. My brother the best example is that a wheelchair user will not be able to dig the land for money be employed by a construction company as a builder. Therefore, persons with disabilities will be confined in the formal sector where the competition is high and the market is flooding.

Discussion

The research identifies key gaps in the labor market inclusion of persons with disabilities, specifically the lack of professional skills, persistent discrimination, insufficient workplace accommodations, and limited representation in leadership roles. Similar studies, such as those by Gottlieb and Blanck (2010) and Handicap International (2016), also emphasized discrimination and misconceptions about the productivity of persons with disabilities as significant barriers to employment.¹⁰ This study also highlighted a significant gap in policies and frameworks that encompass indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) of the local communities. The study established that Zimbabwe's policy frameworks often overlooked tailored IKS towards the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labor market. While prior research, such as Mitra (2012), a study had discussed the barriers related to the lack of infrastructure and specialized resources as the main factor mitigating participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market, this study viewed employers misconception and negative perceptions towards employability of persons with disabilities with disabilities as the main hindrance.¹¹ In line with other study highlighted the importance of increasing the representation of persons with disabilities in decision-making positions.¹²

Limitations: The study was conducted in an urban setting and could have a potential urban bias. However, key informants from the Federation of Organizations of Disabled People in Zimbabwe (FODPZ) were included to capture diverse perspectives and experiences of persons with disabilities across different contexts, potentially mitigating this limitation.

Conclusion

Basing on the rigorous analysis on factors associated with low labour participation among persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe the study concluded that persons with disabilities are shunned on the labour market on account of perceived incapacity. Drawing from the medical model of disability, some organization hold a misconception that persons with disabilities are not able to fully perform in the labour market as a result of one's impairments. The study concludes that among persons with disabilities have a strong feeling that employers have a misconception and negative perceptions towards employability of persons with disabilities.

The study also concluded that persons with disabilities are not equally participating in the labour market due to discrimination tendencies within the communities and organization. Several work places do not accommodate

persons with disabilities as they lack elevators, sign language interpreters and ramps among other thing to make a workplace disability friendly.

Another prominent conclusion is that the government of Zimbabwe established laws and regulations such as the Disabled Persons Act of 1992 to facilitate participation of persons with disabilities. However, these measures could not fully protect the rights of persons with disabilities to equally participate in labour force due to lack of enforcement.

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