

## Stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities in employment and promotion: A review of the public service in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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### Abstract

This study examines how stigma and discrimination against PWDs continue to exist in the public sector of South Africa's Limpopo Province's hiring and promotion procedures. PWD representation is still disproportionately low, even in the face of progressive laws like the Employment Equity Act and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The study critically looks at the ways that systemic ableism, leadership inertia, and institutional cultures still thwart efforts at inclusion. The analysis emphasizes the conflict between formal equality and real-life experiences of exclusion in public institutions, drawing on Nancy Fraser's Theory of Social Justice and the Social Model of Disability. The study's methodology is based on secondary data analysis, which includes published academic literature, policy reviews, annual departmental reports, and the results of disability audits. Inadequate implementation of reasonable accommodations, informal hiring practices, undertrained HR staff, and leadership's unwillingness to enforce inclusion mandates are some of the main structural obstacles. Despite the existence of disability inclusion policies, research shows that their implementation is frequently tokenistic and lacks the institutional will and accountability systems required to make them a reality. This paper argues that symbolic compliance with inclusion frameworks perpetuates inequality and calls for stronger mechanisms of enforcement and capacity building. Recommendations include embedding disability inclusion within strategic human resource management systems, developing inclusive performance indicators, and capacitating managers on disability rights. The paper contributes to the discourse on public sector transformation, advocating for an actionable shift from rhetorical commitment to practical change in addressing disability-based exclusion.

**Keywords:** Disability Inclusion; Employment Discrimination; Public Service; Stigma; Limpopo Province

### 1. Introduction

In South Africa, it is both a constitutional requirement and a basic human rights imperative that people with disabilities (PWDs) be included in public employment. People with disabilities are entitled to equality and protection from discrimination, as stated in Section 9 of the Republic of South Africa's 1996 Constitution. Numerous legislative and policy frameworks, including the Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998), the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (No. 4 of 2000), and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015), further strengthen this right. The state's commitment to ending systemic discrimination and guaranteeing historically marginalized groups, including PWDs, fair access to employment opportunities is outlined in these instruments taken together.

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Even though these legal frameworks are progressive, their actual application has been uneven and insufficient, especially in provincial administrations. Numerous oversight and evaluation reports in the province of Limpopo attest to the ongoing failure to meet employment equity goals for PWDs. The percentage of PWDs working in the provincial public sector is still far lower than the 2% national goal, claim Ndou and Makhubele (2023). Public buildings that are physically inaccessible, a lack of funding for assistive technology, unofficial gatekeeping in hiring and promotion, and a general lack of awareness among public officials are all contributing factors.

These difficulties are a sign of more pervasive institutional opposition to change. According to Ramano and Mofokeng (2021), PWDs are still marginalized by ingrained ableist norms in organizational cultures, which undermines the goals of policy. In addition, Mavuso and Duma (2022) stress that a lot of government agencies treat inclusion more like a bureaucratic checklist than a real objective, exhibiting symbolic compliance rather than true commitment. According to recent studies, the absence of disaggregated data on disability employment hinders monitoring and evaluation efforts and hides exclusionary patterns (Mogomotsi and Madigele, 2020; Dube and Mhlanga, 2023). The continued existence of these obstacles points to the necessity of a strategic change toward legally binding inclusion goals, the development of human resource systems' capacity, and the institutionalization of leadership that is sensitive to disabilities.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Workplace Stigma and Cultural Perceptions

People with disabilities (PWDs) frequently face deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes that characterize them as passive, dependent, or incapable. Employment outcomes are greatly impacted by these societal attitudes, especially in formalized and bureaucratic settings like the public sector (Makgopa and Seabi, 2022). Disability is still perceived through a prism of sympathy or superstition in many African contexts, which has a direct impact on how institutional actors perceive the worth, productivity, and promoteability of PWDs (Chikanda and Ramakumba, 2021). Stigma persists despite policy reforms because organizational change strategies rarely address these beliefs. Furthermore, racial, gender, and socioeconomic stereotypes interact with cultural stereotypes to reinforce marginalization and impact hiring, performance reviews, and leadership development opportunities (Sithole and Mthombeni, 2023).

### 2.2. Discrimination in Employment Practices

PWDs are frequently the targets of subtle and systemic forms of discrimination in the public sector. Letsoalo and Ramaila (2021) point out that hiring practices frequently presume complete physical and sensory abilities, which excludes applicants with invisible disabilities. In a similar vein, systems for performance reviews do not acknowledge unique situations or allow for the use of different assessment techniques. According to Mabasa and Lekganyane (2022), ableist presumptions frame institutional norms regarding "productivity" and "fit," which penalize or exclude people who might need reasonable accommodations. These difficulties are further exacerbated by unconscious bias among senior managers and human resource officials, particularly when disability sensitization training is either nonexistent or is only considered a one-time compliance exercise (Ndlovu and Dlamini, 2023).

### 2.3. Gaps in Reasonable Accommodation

In practice, reasonable accommodation is rarely used, even in the face of explicit legislative provisions. Despite frequently pointing to resource limitations, provincial departments neglect to include accommodations in their strategic plans or annual budgets (Mokgolo and Kekana, 2022). For example, many buildings are still physically inaccessible, and assistive technology or accessible communication formats are rarely given priority during procurement procedures (Mokgatle, 2022). Furthermore, during the hiring or onboarding processes, human resource frameworks do not proactively recognize and address employee needs. The inability of the institution to incorporate disability inclusion into regular administrative planning is reflected in this. Reasonable accommodation is viewed as an exception rather than a general requirement, which perpetuates exclusion, as Kgaphola and Mokoena (2024) contend.

### 2.4. Symbolic Implementation

The actual application of disability inclusion policies and their existence are significantly at odds. Although many departments declare compliance in their annual Employment Equity reports, these are frequently generic, unfunded, and devoid of quantifiable goals (Dube and Sebola, 2024). Plans for disability equity are usually copied or standardized across departments, with little consideration for the needs of employees or the local context. Moreover, departments can carry on with impunity due to the absence of penalties for non-implementation (Matlala and Mothapo, 2022). Disability inclusion essentially turns into a bureaucratic symbolism exercise that creates documents without improving actual conditions.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

#### **3.1. Social Model of Disability**

A fundamental lens for comprehending PWDs' exclusion from public institutions is offered by the Social Model of Disability. This model focuses on how society creates barriers through inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and rigid policies rather than identifying disability in the individual (Barnes and Mercer, 2021). Exclusion in Limpopo's public service is more a result of institutions' inaction than of impairment. The model pushes public managers to create inclusive cultures, make accommodations, and rethink procedures. According to Kangwa and Molefe (2023), adopting the social model has prompted certain municipalities to update job descriptions, conduct accessibility audits of buildings, and offer inclusive training to employees.

#### **3.2. Fraser's Theory of Social Justice**

A strong framework for analysing the ongoing exclusion of PWDs is provided by Nancy Fraser's multifaceted theory of social justice, which includes redistribution, recognition, and representation. The fair distribution of material resources, such as funding for housing and employment opportunities, is referred to as redistribution. The eradication of cultural stigma and the affirmation of various identities are related to recognition. The political aspects of who has a say in decision-making processes are addressed by representation (Fraser, 2008). All three factors are important in the public service of the province of Limpopo. When PWDs are underemployed, ableist cultures undermine their recognition, and there aren't enough PWDs in leadership positions, redistribution fails. Applying Fraser's framework to disability policy, which addresses surface-level inclusion (representation), explains why symbolic compliance endures, claim Mashaba and Madonsela (2022).

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### **4. Methodological approach**

In order to synthesize secondary data pertinent to disability inclusion in the provincial public service of Limpopo, this study uses a desktop-based qualitative review methodology. The approach is in line with the tenets of exploratory research and is especially well-suited for analysing institutional dynamics, the application of policies, and cultural phenomena without involving human subjects. Peer-reviewed scholarly publications from journals in disability studies, public administration, and human resource management are among the data sources, as are reports from the federal and provincial governments, such as Employment Equity Reports, Annual Performance Plans, and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015).

Publicly accessible evaluation and oversight documents from watchdog organizations, such as Auditor-General reports and institutional audits and performance reviews issued by organizations like the Public Service Commission (PSC), Parliamentary committee briefings and the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA). No interviews, surveys, or direct observation were conducted, and no identifiable personal data were used. Consequently, the study does not involve human participants and is exempt from ethical review in accordance with standard academic protocols for document-based research (Wessels and Sadler, 2022). This methodological choice enables a critical, evidence-based interrogation of structural and systemic factors underpinning continued marginalisation of people with disabilities in public employment, without posing any ethical risks or harm.

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### **5. Findings and Discussion**

#### **5.1. Enduring Stigma and Cultural Barriers**

The reviewed literature and institutional reports provide ample evidence of the persistence of stigma. Long-standing misconceptions about abnormality, incapacity, and dependency serve as the foundation for cultural biases that still influence hiring, promotion, and appointment decisions (Makgopa and Seabi, 2022). These prejudices are frequently unsaid but show up as subtle forms of exclusion, like preventing PWDs from applying for senior roles or giving them undue attention during performance reviews (Mahlangu and Shongwe, 2021). According to a study by Selepe and Kgari-Masondo (2023), there is a direct correlation between institutional culture and leadership awareness. The study also found that stigma was more common in departments where senior management lacked training on disability inclusion.

## 5.2. Career Stagnation

The restricted career advancement opportunities for employees with disabilities are a common theme in secondary sources and institutional reviews. These workers frequently continue to be restricted to lower occupational levels and have little access to opportunities for training, mentoring, or development (Ndou and Makhubele, 2023). Mashiloane and Tsotetsi (2022) claim that despite the Employment Equity Act's legal mandate for such interventions, the lack of targeted talent development programs for designated groups exacerbates this stagnation. Additionally, there is a self-fulfilling cycle of underrepresentation in leadership positions due to workplace cultures that frequently assume PWDs lack the motivation or skills necessary for upward mobility.

## 5.3. Weak Institutional Capacity

The absence of institutional capacity is a major obstacle to the successful execution of inclusion policies. According to Dube and Sebola (2024), there aren't many provincial departments with units dedicated to disability inclusion. Rather, duties are distributed among general human resources departments, where inclusion is viewed as a bonus rather than a top priority. According to Mnguni (2022), funding for disability inclusion is either completely nonexistent or woefully insufficient, which makes it impossible to hire staff, modify facilities, or buy assistive technology. As a result, departments prioritize fulfilling the bare minimum of reporting requirements over addressing the substantive needs of people with disabilities, leading to a compliance-oriented rather than transformative approach.

## 5.4. Policy Implementation Gaps

Although South Africa has a strong policy environment, its application is still patchy and mostly symbolic. Disability-responsive planning, reasonable accommodations, and accountability measures are just a few of the comprehensive inclusion strategies described in the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015). But as Mogashoa and Morake (2023) point out, departmental operations hardly ever implement these directives. Disability-related indicators are rarely included in senior manager performance agreements, and internal audits do not quantify progress. Therefore, rather than being a lived reality, inclusion continues to be a rhetorical ideal. According to Kgomo and Morudu (2024), policies will continue to be selectively interpreted or disregarded completely in the absence of enforcement mechanisms and consequence management.

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## 6. Conclusion

The intersection of administrative, cultural, and systemic barriers that still prevent people with disabilities (PWDs) from being employed and promoted in the provincial public sector of Limpopo has been critically examined in this paper. The study, which used a document-based qualitative review, identified the main causes of exclusion as being the continuation of ableist workplace cultures, the lack of reasonable accommodations, the implementation of symbolic policies, and the lack of institutional capacity. The Employment Equity Act and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are just two examples of the robust legislative and policy framework that exists, but implementation is still uneven, underfunded, and mostly symbolic. The results of the study demonstrate that policy alone is not enough to achieve inclusive public service employment in the absence of specific institutional mechanisms and cultural change.

Based on Fraser's multifaceted theory of social justice and the Social Model of Disability, the analysis has demonstrated that exclusion has material, cultural, and political dimensions. PWDs will continue to be marginalized in the workforce and equity goals will remain aspirational unless structural changes are made to address these interconnected barriers.

### *Recommendations*

To move beyond symbolic compliance and foster genuine inclusion, the following recommendations are proposed

- **Institutional Integration:** Instead of being viewed as a separate or elective issue, disability inclusion ought to be integrated into all fundamental frameworks for strategic planning and human resource management (HRM).
- **Accountability and Monitoring:** Departments are required to set quantifiable performance metrics related to disability equity. Annual performance plans ought to cover these, and departmental scorecards and audits ought to keep an eye on them.
- **Dedicated Budgeting:** Disability inclusion should be covered by specific line items that include training interventions, assistive technology, physical infrastructure modifications, and communication aids.
- **Leadership and Awareness:** To combat stigma and advance inclusive organizational cultures, senior managers and HR professionals should be required to participate in ongoing training and sensitization initiatives.

- Representation: To guarantee that their lived experiences inform institutional reforms, people with disabilities should be meaningfully represented in hiring panels, policy development, and decision-making processes.

PWD inclusion in the public sector will remain theoretical rather than actual without these interventions; it will be ingrained in documents but not implemented in real life. The Limpopo public service must undergo a purposeful, accountable, and well-resourced transformation in order to become a fair and inclusive organization.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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