



Liändrie Steffens

# LEFT BEHIND

The Employment Crisis Facing Persons  
with Disabilities in South Africa

Disability Studies

Collection Editor

**DAMIAN MELLIFONT**

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





LEFT BEHIND



Liändrie Steffens

# LEFT BEHIND

The Employment Crisis  
Facing Persons with  
Disabilities in South Africa

Disability Studies

Collection Editor

Damian Mellifont



First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Lived Places Publishing expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The author and editor have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission, the publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2025 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781915271877 (pbk)  
ISBN: 9781915271891 (ePDF)  
ISBN: 9781915271884 (ePUB)

The right of Liändrie Steffens to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy  
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design  
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing  
P.O. Box 1845  
47 Echo Avenue  
Miller Place, NY 11764

[www.livedplacespublishing.com](http://www.livedplacespublishing.com)

# Content warning

This book contains first-hand accounts and descriptions of discrimination, exclusion, and systemic barriers experienced by persons with disabilities in the context of employment. Some chapters include discussions of rejection, exploitation, and marginalisation, which may be distressing to some readers.

Reader discretion is advised, especially for those with lived experience of these issues.

# Abstract

This book investigates the persistent employment crisis facing persons with disabilities in South Africa, despite extensive legislation, initiatives, incentive schemes and global disability rights commitments. Drawing on original research, policy analysis and lived experiences collected through a nationwide study, this book uncovers the structural and attitudinal barriers that hinder employment. It critically examines the effectiveness of quota systems, vocational training and government programmes, highlighting the disconnect between policy and practice. Through quantitative analysis and thematic exploration of discrimination, educational exclusion, cultural and societal stigma and systemic challenges, this book reveals how disability intersects with race, geography, gender and socio-economic status to shape employment outcomes. It calls for urgent reforms in policy implementation, inclusive recruitment, attitudinal changes and accurate data collection to ensure meaningful economic inclusion for persons with disabilities.

## Key words

disability employment, South Africa, persons with disabilities, discrimination, inclusive policy, quota systems, accessibility, vocational training, labour equity, systemic barriers, employment data, economic empowerment, disability rights, education and disability, intersectionality.

# Contents

<b>Preface</b>		<b>viii</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	History of the progress made in South Africa for people with disabilities seeking employment	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	Current state of inclusion of people with disabilities in employment in South Africa	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Survey results and analysis	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Identifying factors influencing employment outcomes for people with disabilities in South Africa	<b>97</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Access to education and employment outcomes thereof	<b>113</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Navigating employment barriers: Experiences of discrimination and self-perceived challenges in the job application process	<b>137</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	Organisations in South Africa	<b>165</b>
<b>Discussion topics</b>		<b>186</b>
<b>References</b>		<b>187</b>
<b>Index</b>		<b>193</b>

# Preface

When you meet someone new, how do you introduce yourself?

You might say your name, where you are from and what you do for a living.

Most of us introduce ourselves or describe ourselves in terms of what we do for a living.

Imagine you were unemployed. Most of us have faced that at some point in our lives. What do we say?

Now imagine you have a disability and, like so many South Africans, you have never been employed before.

Our careers are so intrinsic to our identity, our purpose in life and why we get up at 7 am in the morning.

When we think about the needs of persons with disabilities, the barriers they may face or even the exclusion they face in society, what comes to mind is often barriers in education, family and accessibility in public spaces. Very few actually think about employment and economic empowerment.

There are thousands of initiatives and programmes across the world, and also in South Africa, providing scholarships to universities or high school for students with disabilities that host accessible events and training and many charities that provide basic necessities; however, time and time again we neglect to look at employment and overall economic empowerment.

Most people agree that unemployment of persons with disabilities is much higher than that of persons without. But how much higher and what is the situation really like. You most likely heard someone say or even thought yourself that the situation can't be that bad because of anti-discrimination laws, incentives, quota systems, government programmes and initiatives promoting the employment of persons with disabilities. However, what effect has this truly had? Does it have positive effects? Does it increase the employment of persons with disabilities or does it have unintended negative effects.

Something heard often when speaking to a non-disabled person is "I know a person with a disability, he/she is a lawyer, an engineer, a doctor" or they will simply mention someone who is a famous advocate. Most people only know or heard of someone, but they haven't really come across someone at their office, at a work event or in their social circles.

I always challenge them and challenge you, the reader, as well: how many persons with disabilities do you really know and who are in a secure profession? At the moment, 16% of the global population has a disability. Why do we not meet them in our workplaces and daily lives?



# 1

## **History of the progress made in South Africa for people with disabilities seeking employment**

Seeking employment has historically been an issue for people with disabilities in most countries worldwide. However, attitudes toward people with disabilities have changed dramatically over the years, and many countries have put legislation in place to improve opportunities and accessibility. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was ratified in 2008 and signed by 164 countries, its purpose being to protect, promote and ensure equal rights to people with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2007). Unfortunately, implementing strategies, programmes and legislation does not always create the perfect system and resolve all issues.

Like many countries, South Africa too has made significant progress regarding the accessibility of employment and the employment opportunities available to people with disabilities. The government has implemented multiple systems and laws (described in this chapter) to create employment opportunities for people with physical or sensory disabilities. These aim to promote greater inclusion and equal opportunities for people with disabilities.

Sadly, there are discrepancies between what is on paper and the effectiveness of these measures. People still face many obstacles, challenges and prejudices if they have a disability. It can impact finding employment, retaining a position and feeling fulfilled and valued in their role.

So, what progress has South Africa made regarding people with disabilities seeking employment, and what challenges do people still face? Let's first look at historical attitudes and the progress made over the last century, then compare it to the current situation in South Africa and the remaining issues people may face.

## **Progress made in employment pathways for people with disabilities**

Over the last century, there have been significant changes in official legislation and society's attitudes to disability. It means that people's experiences of access to employment opportunities and rights within the workplace have also changed over time.

Pathways to employment for those with a disability begin far before they commence applying for a job. In many cases, a person's experience in the education system is the first stage in their journey. The success or failure of this phase can significantly impact upon their future employment opportunities and experiences in the workplace.

In the 1990s, the policy focus turned to disability equality in education. The South African Schools Act (South African Government, 1996) targeted inclusive education. It meant greater integration for people with disabilities into the mainstream South African education system. The policy also promoted more opportunities for people with disabilities using the special education system rather than mainstream schooling. According to the Integrated National Disability Strategy (Office of the President, 1997), policies regarding people with disabilities accessing education focus on the years spent in the classroom. Very little focus has been on education beyond that, such as higher, further, or vocational qualifications. It meant that education and employment had weak links. The strategy suggested that a greater focus on this area could aid people with disabilities' economic empowerment in the future.

The aim of some organisations is to improve links between educational bodies and employers. For example, the Amy Foundation collaborated with the African German Youth Initiative to organise a conference to strengthen links and also to develop vocational training opportunities from a younger age. The latter strategy aims to allow young people (14–35 years) to develop relevant life and work-based skills (Amy Foundation, 2020). Introducing new vocational training initiatives now plays

a role in increasing employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. They allow people of all abilities to gain skills and qualifications in the workplace. However, some problems still need to be addressed with the relevance, inclusiveness and availability of vocational training.

One problem is that many of the vocational training initiatives only cover specific geographical locations. For example, the Amy Foundation implemented its initiatives only in Cape Town and the surrounding area. Another issue is the need for more support from employers. Currently, many initiatives focus only on the educational side of the partnership. Akoojee, Gewer and Mcgrath (2005) note that there is a need for more employers willing to commit to vocational training programmes.

Although the Government only took official steps to improve equality in education in the 1990s, initiatives to create greater equality in employment began much sooner. While some acts related only to groups with specific disabilities, others took a general approach to improving equality for people with disabilities. Some earlier legislation included the Mental Disorders Act (1916) and the Blind Persons Act (1920). The Mental Health Act 1973 that further promoted inclusion for those with mental health issues replaced the former.

These policies were a step forward for those with mental health or sensory disabilities. Unfortunately, there were still considerable gaps in the system for people with disabilities that these policies did not cover.

One of the most significant legislations regarding people with disabilities was the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act (1946),

followed by the Disabled Persons (Employment) Amended Act (1955). These Acts put in place various steps to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace and to improve accessibility and opportunities.

The Employment Equity Act 1998 (South African Government, 1998) outlines steps to protect people with disabilities in the workplace. The Act aimed to identify and remove workplace barriers and promote equal opportunities for people of all abilities. It was later updated to the Employment Equity Amendment Act (2005). We also see South Africa's commitment to disability inclusion internationally through the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007.

Since the turn of the Millenium, one of the most notable pieces of legislation for people with disabilities in South Africa was the National Disability Rights Policy (2015). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2015), the policy aims to promote inclusion, mainstreaming and integration of people with disabilities. It is an extensive policy covering multiple aspects of life and social development, including measures for inclusion in the workplace, educational settings and society. The policy also promotes the well-being of individuals and their families. Furthermore, it aims to provide adequate social and economic protection for vulnerable, poor and marginalised people with disabilities.

The South African Human Rights Commission (2017) says the Employment Equity Act and the subsequent Employment Equity Amendment Act outline the employer's role in making reasonable accommodations. An employer is exempt from making

accommodations if they cause any unintended negative consequences. In addition to the Employment Equity Act (1998) and to support its terms, the Department of Labour (2015) introduced the Code of Good Practice on the Employment of People with Disabilities. The policy aims to inform and educate employers about their legal obligations when employing people with disabilities. It also looks at rights in the workplace from the employee's perspective, ensuring people with disabilities know their rights. Therefore, one of the aims of the Code of Good Practice on the Employment of People with Disabilities is to reduce the number of disputes between employers and employees.

The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) (South African Government, 2000) is a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, including discrimination against people with disabilities. Not only does it forbid harassment and hate speech, it also prohibits discriminatory behaviour by individuals, groups, private organisations and the government.

The South African government has also published various white papers that further promote inclusion in the workplace for people with disabilities, notably the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (Office of the President, 1997) and the White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Office of the President, 2016). Both papers serve the purpose of protecting the rights of people with disabilities.

A further measure put in place to encourage more employment opportunities for people with disabilities is the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act No 53 of 2003 (B-BBEE Act). According to the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition

(2013), 'the fundamental objective of the Act is to advance economic transformation and enhance the economic participation of black people in the South African economy'. It is essentially an incentive scheme that works on a points system to encourage employers to employ more black people as well as black people with disabilities. According to the scorecard, organisations get a certificate from Verification Agencies declaring their BEE level. The BEE scheme is essential in South Africa and implemented strictly with penalties.

Chamber (2020) describes how the BEE scheme aims to empower people with disabilities and increase their employment opportunities; however, they also say there are problems, suggesting that the motives of employers and the methods they use are questionable. On the one hand, the initiative is fantastic for employers who truly seek workplace transformation and are genuine about equality in the workplace. It may set them on the road to creating a diverse and inclusive working environment. On the other hand, organisations only receive points if the people with disabilities are considered black. The BEE scheme was updated and includes South African citizens considered African, Coloured or Indian. Unfortunately, some employers use the scheme as a box ticking exercise to ensure a good BEE score. Additionally, the scheme has been subject to much controversy regarding its effectiveness as it may discourage employers from employing other races and genders for a role if there is no incentive. Many people with disabilities want to see similar legislation and schemes focused on employing people with disabilities

and not solely based on gender and race. Therefore, it is another example of how implementing strategies to improve employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups may sometimes have the opposite effect.

It is not only the South African government that has taken steps to improve opportunities for people with disabilities. Advocacy groups and civil society organisations have played a vital role in improving the employment situation. These organisations promote the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace, raise awareness of the issues surrounding disability and employment and advocate for policy improvements. Such actions help to highlight areas that need further work and to drive change. For example, the South African Blind Worker Organisation helps people with visual impairments find work and assists them in their employment. The name of the organisation has since changed to BLINDsa. Other organisations include: The Deaf Federation of South Africa; The Quadriplegic Association of South Africa; The South African Mental Health Federation; and The Down Syndrome Forum of South Africa.

Most organisations focus on specific categories of disability, with the benefit being that each organisation clearly understands the challenges that people with those disabilities face. The negative is that only some people fall neatly into a category, so some groups have limited support from organisations.

Regarding putting disability equality initiatives and legislation policies in place, the South African government and associated bodies have made great strides. Therefore, on the face of it, the

situation in South Africa has dramatically improved for people with disabilities. Are things as smooth-running as they may seem? Not necessarily.

## **Implementing legislation and ongoing barriers**

Despite the progress made in South Africa regarding employment equality for people with disabilities, many ongoing issues exist. While multiple strategies, acts, policies and white papers are in place, there are employment barriers for people with disabilities as there are issues with putting the legislation into practice. In most cases, the policies promote inclusion, opportunities, accessibility and equality for people of all abilities. Many policies also promote anti-discriminatory practices in the workplace and routes to employment.

Unfortunately, what is on paper does not necessarily reflect everyone in society, with discrimination remaining an issue. Discrimination is sadly one of the greatest challenges that people with disabilities face when trying to secure employment. Stigma plays a significant role in perpetuating this discrimination, as the Independent Living Institute (2021) explains that there remains a stereotypical view of people with disabilities as needing care. This stigma leads some people to believe people with disabilities are less capable and may have less to offer in the workplace.

Often, discrimination is intentional and is sometimes the result of individuals viewing people with disabilities as less worthy members of society. In this situation, explicit discrimination has

occurred, and an employer could openly discriminate against people with disabilities.

Another form of deliberate discrimination that may take place in the workplace is covert discrimination. This form of discrimination is hidden or disguised, so it is not always immediately obvious when taking place. An employer may use passive techniques to deliberately discriminate against an employee based on their disability. These passive techniques may include a lack of reasonable accommodation, microaggressions, not sharing information, spreading rumours, isolation, lower salaries and being overlooked for advancement. Even when deliberate discrimination does not occur, ignorance and lack of understanding potentially cause barriers to employment. An employer may not fully understand the legislation, specific disabilities or the issues surrounding disability in the workplace. It is a form of unintentional discrimination also known as indirect, constructive or adverse effect discrimination. Unintentional discrimination can occur between individuals, such as an employer to an employee, or by organisations to large groups of people. Regarding the latter, Citizens Advice (2020) describes how policies, practices and rules that apply to everyone can sometimes adversely affect some people more than others. When that happens, it can put people at a particular disadvantage. Employment legislation currently in place may adversely impact some groups within society compared to other groups, such as people with disabilities. The problems people with disabilities face extends far beyond society's attitudes and discrimination. Gaps in legislation also cause issues, and in some cases, attempts to improve the lives of people

with disabilities has the opposite effect. Furthermore, there are significant issues with implementing the legal strategies in many situations. The Independent Living Institute (2021) says that the legacy of past legislations such as the Apartheid policies that completely excluded and marginalised people with disabilities continues to cause problems. Even in areas of the law with clear improvements, unresolved issues still need solutions.

Usually, those writing the legislations are not people with disabilities themselves nor do they consult people with disabilities. Those who draw up the legislation need to be made aware of all the issues, and their lack of lived experience is one of the reasons for gaps and problems with implementation. Although the Independent Living Institute acknowledges the progress made, particularly since 1994, the legislation continues to exclude some people with disabilities from employment opportunities and creates barriers. In many cases, large sections of an act or policy promote equality and protect the rights of people with disabilities; however, some sections still need to be updated, so they leave potential barriers.

The Independent Living Institute highlights the Labour Relations Act of 1995 (South African Government, 1995) as a piece of legislation that is not fully effective in removing barriers. Its purpose was to change employment practices and prevent unfair discrimination in the workplace. However, this Act merely provides guidelines for appropriate practice for employers. It is not enforceable, so there are challenges in ensuring employers follow the guidelines. Monitoring and enforcement of legislation remains an issue across the board. The Independent Living

Institute has also noted how many legislative policies refer only to ways employers can increase equality, inclusion and opportunities for people with disabilities. They do not cover the broader societal issues that prevent people with disabilities from accessing employment such as discrimination.

One of the broader problems is the South African infrastructure, which creates multiple barriers to people with disabilities accessing employment. Some challenges include the limited to non-existent public transport, and when public transport is available, it is not accessible. Access into or around buildings are also very limited.

A further issue is the recruitment process. Websites and publications that advertise positions are not always accessible to people with disabilities. Examples of this include inaccessible job ads (pictures with no text for users of screen readers), inaccessible websites and video or audio without transcription. Similarly, the application process can pose additional challenges for people with disabilities. These challenges often include assessments that are not accessible, phone calls that are not possible for persons with hearing impairments, online assessments that include video or audio without accommodations and often automated assessments where there is no communication with a person. These are made clear in Chapter 4 where a survey was conducted to investigate what are the core challenges faced by people with disabilities.

## **A shift in attitudes towards people with disabilities**

Legislation put in place is just one step taken towards employment progress in South Africa. Another step in the right direction

is a change in attitudes towards people with disabilities. This change has impacted the approach taken by the government and other organisations to the barriers people with disabilities continue to face in gaining employment.

Historically, organisations have used the medical model of disability when putting legislation or support in place. The shift in attitudes means organisations now lean more towards the social model of disability. According to Disability Nottinghamshire (2022), the medical model of disability focuses on the disability or impairment. If a person with a disability faces challenges, then the issue is the disability. Therefore, the solution is to fix the disability with medical treatment. The social model of disability instead focuses on the organisation of society to accommodate people's disabilities, says Disability Nottinghamshire (2022). The problem is the environment and society in the social model rather than the disability. Thus, the solution to the problem is to change society or the environment, not to fix the disability.

It is easy to demonstrate the difference between the two models and how they apply to people with disabilities trying to access the workplace by giving an example. One example is a wheelchair user in a work environment with stairs. The medical model sees the issue as the person's lack of mobility. Unless it is possible to treat or reduce the disability medically, there is little the employer can do to resolve the issue. Therefore, the barrier to employment remains for the individual. In contrast, the social model of disability does not see the problem as the person's disability. The problem is the environment, which is the stairs preventing the person from accessing the workplace. In this situation, the problem to fix is not the person but the lack of

accessibility. Typical examples of solutions may include fitting a ramp, installing a lift or providing an alternative workspace.

The Independent Living Institute (2021) describes how South African organisations traditionally used the medical model of disability. Historically, disabilities were considered a health and welfare issue. Therefore, welfare institutions have taken on any issues relating to disabilities. The attitude that disabilities were a welfare issue seeped beyond the government and other organisations into society. It has contributed to ongoing negative attitudes and perceptions of disability. People often saw people with disabilities as needing care and treatment, so the focus was on providing a more caring environment. There was little focus on creating equality or providing opportunities in the workplace. Usually, non-disabled people provided the services for people with disabilities while overlooking the role of peer workers, and people with disabilities had little say in their care or the services they received. The focus was on the nature of their disabilities and their dependence on others.

Due to the dependence created by the medical model of disability, people with disabilities were disempowered. It led to their segregation and isolation from mainstream society and also inhibited their social, economic and political rights. In turn, social exclusion created barriers to accessing education, employment, and basic services. Furthermore, it negatively impacted the relationships, communications and family lives of people with disabilities. The Independent Living Institute (2021) says that there has since been a move towards the social model of disability. It is a response to the recognition that disability is a

human rights and development issue rather than a welfare issue and that people with disabilities have equal rights.

Applying the social model of disability involves restructuring society and attitudes towards disability. It implies that everyone, from individuals to the government, should take steps to address the needs of people with disabilities to create an inclusive society. In terms of employment, the social model of disability is about employers not focusing on the disability of a potential employee. Instead, they should focus on the abilities they are bringing to the job and ways to empower that person by removing barriers to employment.



# 2

## **Current state of inclusion of people with disabilities in employment in South Africa**

So, what is the current state of inclusion in employment for South Africans with disabilities? It is not a straightforward situation, as many factors impact employment pathways for people with disabilities.

The country's socio-economic situation, unemployment rates among the general population and the additional barriers people with disabilities face are just some factors to consider. These factors may contribute to the experiences of people with disabilities trying to find employment. Likewise, they may impact peoples' ongoing experiences in the workplace once they secure a job.

By considering each factor and looking generally at the ongoing barriers people with disabilities face in their employment pathways, organisations can put in steps to reduce or eliminate the problems. Therefore, future experiences of people with disabilities depend on what is happening in South Africa now.

## **Inequality in South Africa**

To fully understand the unemployment situation in South Africa, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of the country's broader socio-economic situation. By putting employment and unemployment statistics into perspective, a better insight into the challenges that people with disabilities face can be gained.

The World Bank (2021) has named South Africa as the most unequal country in the world in its GINI index since 2018. There is a considerable disparity in the wealth and quality of lifestyles between the poorer members of society and the wealthiest South African citizens (Masson, 2022). Masson based these assertions on the findings of The World Bank's report "Inequalities in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union" (Sulla, Zikhali and Cuevas, 2022). On a list of 164 countries worldwide, South Africa ranks first on the global poverty database.

Statistics demonstrating the disparity between wealth and poverty are shocking. The World Bank's findings show that the upper 10% of the population holds 71% of the nation's wealth. In contrast, the bottom 60% hold a mere 7% (Sulla, Zikhali and Cuevas, 2022).

Wealth is not the only inequality in South Africa. Sulla, Zikhali and Cuevas (2022) also suggest that inequality of opportunity