



Persons with Disabilities Are Workers, Too

(Updated February 2022)

An estimated [1 billion people](#)—or about 15 percent of the world’s population—live with some form of disability. In fact, most people will experience disability [at some point](#) in their life, either temporarily or permanently, and especially later in life. But disability also tracks along economic and social lines. Poverty, limited access to health care and unsafe jobs can put working people at [greater risk](#) of developing disabilities, particularly among those already marginalized, such as women, migrants and minority groups. What is more, persons with disabilities often [face barriers and stigma](#) when trying to access employment or education, further entrenching inequality.

What Do We Mean When We Say “Disability”?

- The term “disability” can apply to [a wide variety](#) of conditions and characteristics, and persons with disabilities prefer to identify and explain their disabilities in many different ways. This includes disabilities that may be [visible or invisible](#) to others.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD](#)) defines disability inclusively: *“Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”* As of 2021, [182 countries](#) had ratified the convention.
- The CRPD’s approach uses the [social model of disability](#), which sees disability not as something intrinsic to a person but rather something produced when the environment is not designed to meet a person’s needs. The social model rejects older approaches, such as the charity model (people with disabilities are helpless and must be taken care of) and the medical model (people with disabilities are sick and must be cured).
- People with disabilities use a number of methods to participate in society on an equal basis. They may use wheelchairs, Braille or sign language. They may take medications, request time off for health care, or bring family members or service animals along when they travel. Above all, persons with disabilities have the right to full and effective participation in society free from discrimination.

Disability in the World of Work

- The International Labor Organization estimates that close to [800 million people](#) of working age around the world have disabilities. However, they are often [twice as likely](#) to be unemployed as persons without disabilities.
- Employment barriers for persons with disabilities are intersectional, as they compound on top of other forms of discrimination, particularly for women. Studies from [Ghana](#), [Nepal](#) and [Poland](#) have found significantly higher unemployment among women with disabilities than among men with disabilities, with highly gendered experiences.



- Employers often deny jobs to persons with disabilities, assuming they cannot do the work. Persons with disabilities who do secure jobs also face higher rates of bullying, harassment and violence, [including gender-based violence](#), at work.
- Employers also discriminate against persons with disabilities by not providing [reasonable accommodations](#).

The Global Labor Movement Must Include Persons with Disabilities

- The rallying cry "[Nothing about us without us](#)" comes from the global movement of persons with disabilities fighting for equality in law and in practice. The inclusion of persons with disabilities in trade unions, the representation of their issues in collective bargaining and advocacy, and the [removal of barriers](#) to their participation are all union issues.
- Unions and [disabled persons' organizations](#) (DPOs/OPDs) share common goals in ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to decent work that is free from discrimination and violence.
- The most common approach to boosting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce is a quota system. ([More than 100 countries](#) use such systems.) However, quotas often go unenforced, and they do not guarantee equal access to fair, decent, meaningful work.
- In **Morocco** and **Tunisia**, worker activists with disabilities and their trade unions have prioritized support to workers with disabilities, organizing over 300 workers with disabilities and building their capacity to defend their rights at work.
- In **Kyrgyzstan**, the Solidarity Center is creating a guide for trade unions on how to write collective agreements and policies that safeguard the rights of people with disabilities.

The Pandemic's Toll on Workers with Disabilities

The economic effects of COVID-19 have hit persons with disabilities particularly hard. Evidence suggests workers with disabilities were [twice as likely](#) to lose their jobs during the pandemic.

Helpful Resources

1. Tips for using [respectful and empowering disability language](#) (from USAID) and [writing guidelines](#) (ADA National Network)
2. How to [budget for reasonable accommodations](#) (from Mobility International USA)
3. A checklist for [ensuring events are accessible](#) (from Cornell University)
4. A feminist toolkit for [planning inclusive virtual meetings](#) (from WEDO, see pp. 6-9)