



# Socio-economic factors influencing the voting behavior of people with disabilities in developing nations

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In developing nations, people with disabilities face systemic barriers that impede their full participation in political processes, particularly in voting. This paper explores the intersection of disability and socio-economic factors, analyzing how poverty, education, employment status, and social marginalization affect the voting behavior of disabled individuals. Despite the recognized right to vote, people with disabilities are often excluded from the electoral process due to physical inaccessibility, lack of disability-inclusive policies, and socioeconomic constraints. **Methods:** Through a sociological lens, this study examines how these individuals' political engagement is shaped by structural inequalities, highlighting the compounded impact of disability and economic disadvantage on voter turnout and political participation. Drawing on case studies from low-resource settings. **Findings:** This paper demonstrates that people with disabilities in developing countries face multiple barriers to exercising their right to vote. These barriers include accessible polling stations, voter education, and legal frameworks protecting political rights. These structural inequalities directly impact the voting behavior and levels of political participation of people with disabilities, particularly in resource-limited settings. **Conclusion:** This study emphasizes the importance of inclusive policy reforms to eliminate the specific barriers that people with disabilities face in the electoral process. This requires accessibility to polling stations, voter education targeted to disability groups, and legal protection of their political rights. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The novelty/originality of this article lies in its sociological analysis of how disability intersects with poverty, education, and employment to shape political participation, emphasizing structural barriers and advocating for inclusive electoral policies in developing nations.

**KEYWORDS:** disability rights; voting behavior; political participation; social exclusion; marginalized groups; social justice.

## 1. Introduction

Political participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic societies, and the right to vote is enshrined in numerous international legal instruments as a fundamental human right. It is not only a mechanism for selecting representatives but also a powerful means for individuals to express their needs, influence policies, and shape the direction of their communities and nations. Yet, for a significant segment of the global population people with disabilities this fundamental right remains difficult to exercise, especially in developing nations. Despite the growing emphasis on inclusive governance and equality, persons with disabilities continue to face deeply entrenched barriers that marginalize them from political processes, particularly electoral participation.

Globally, over one billion people approximately 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability. A considerable proportion of them reside in low- and middle-income countries where economic instability, limited infrastructure, and social exclusion

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compound the challenges of disability. While considerable research has been conducted on the rights of persons with disabilities in relation to education, employment, and healthcare, comparatively little attention has been paid to their political rights and behaviors specifically, the socio-economic and structural factors that influence their capacity and willingness to participate in democratic elections. In countries where political participation is already constrained by systemic inequalities, understanding the unique challenges faced by disabled individuals is both urgent and essential.

In developing nations, structural poverty, inadequate access to education, and widespread social stigma act as powerful deterrents to political inclusion for people with disabilities. Often, the environments in which elections take place are neither physically accessible nor socially accommodating. Polling stations may lack ramps or signage for individuals with mobility or visual impairments, while electoral materials rarely provide information in formats accessible to people with intellectual or sensory disabilities. Beyond these logistical barriers, there exists a broader pattern of exclusion wherein the voices of people with disabilities are systematically disregarded in public discourse and policy formulation. The absence of tailored voter education programs, lack of disability-inclusive legal frameworks, and minimal representation of persons with disabilities in political institutions further deepen this democratic deficit.

This paper seeks to address a critical gap in political sociology and disability studies by examining how socio-economic factors influence the voting behavior of people with disabilities in developing countries. Specifically, it investigates how the intersection of disability with poverty, educational disadvantage, unemployment, and social marginalization shapes political engagement and access to the ballot. By focusing on the socio-economic dimensions of this issue, the paper highlights the compounded vulnerabilities faced by people with disabilities—not merely as individuals with impairments, but as members of marginalized socio-political groups whose exclusion is reinforced by interlocking systems of inequality.

To guide this analysis, the paper draws on key sociological frameworks, notably the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality, Structural Functionalism, and Political Economy theory. The Social Model of Disability shifts the focus from individual impairments to the societal structures that disable people by failing to accommodate their needs. Intersectionality, meanwhile, offers a nuanced lens through which to view how overlapping identities—such as disability, gender, class, and ethnicity—produce unique experiences of discrimination. Structural Functionalism provides insights into the ways in which institutions either integrate or exclude certain groups, while Political Economy theory links economic deprivation to reduced civic and political engagement. Together, these frameworks offer a robust theoretical basis for understanding the multi-layered barriers that people with disabilities face in political life.

It is important to note that this study is conceptual in nature. Rather than presenting new empirical findings, it synthesizes existing academic literature, case studies, and reports from international organizations to build a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The decision to adopt a conceptual approach stems from the current lack of integrated scholarship on this topic, particularly in the context of the Global South. By mapping out the theoretical and contextual terrain, the paper lays the groundwork for future empirical investigations that can further deepen our understanding of the political marginalization of people with disabilities.

The research problem at the heart of this study can be summarized as follows: In what ways do socio-economic factors—particularly poverty, education, employment, and social stigma—interact with disability to limit the political participation of individuals in developing nations? Despite widespread recognition of the right to political participation, the lived reality for many people with disabilities is one of exclusion and disenfranchisement. This exclusion is not merely a byproduct of neglect but is actively produced and sustained by discriminatory structures and policy gaps that fail to accommodate diverse needs.

Accordingly, the objectives of this paper are threefold. The first is to analyze the intersection of disability and socio-economic status in shaping voting behavior and political engagement. This involves exploring how poverty, lack of education, and unemployment intersect with disability to restrict access to political processes. The second objective is to identify the key structural, physical, and attitudinal barriers that inhibit political participation among people with disabilities in developing countries. These include inaccessible polling stations, inadequate legal protections, absence of disability-friendly electoral infrastructure, and widespread societal stigma. The final objective is to offer policy-oriented recommendations aimed at promoting inclusive democratic participation for persons with disabilities. Drawing from international best practices and legal frameworks like the CRPD, the paper suggests reforms to enhance accessibility, representation, and political empowerment.

In pursuit of these objectives, the paper will also reflect on the broader implications of political exclusion for social justice and democratic governance. The marginalization of people with disabilities in electoral processes not only violates their individual rights but also weakens the representativeness and legitimacy of democratic systems. By excluding a significant portion of the population from political decision-making, developing nations risk perpetuating cycles of inequality and disenfranchisement that hinder inclusive development and social cohesion.

Finally, this paper seeks to contribute to a growing but still limited body of scholarship that connects disability with political sociology in non-Western contexts. While much of the existing literature focuses on high-income democracies, this study centers the Global South, where the stakes of political exclusion are often higher due to weaker institutions, fewer legal protections, and greater socio-economic disparity. It is hoped that the findings and discussions presented herein will stimulate further academic inquiry, inform policy debates, and support advocacy efforts aimed at creating more inclusive and participatory political systems. In sum, this paper positions the political participation of people with disabilities as a critical frontier in the struggle for social justice and democratic inclusion. By foregrounding the socio-economic determinants of voting behavior, it challenges policymakers, scholars, and civil society actors to rethink the architecture of electoral systems so that they genuinely serve all citizens—regardless of ability, income, or social standing.

### *1.1 Literature review*

The political participation of people with disabilities has been a subject of growing interest in social sciences, particularly in disability studies, political sociology, and human rights discourse. However, the intersection of socioeconomic factors and voting behavior among people with disabilities in developing nations remains a relatively underexplored area of research. This literature review aims to synthesize existing studies that touch on various aspects of disability rights, voter participation, and socioeconomic exclusion. By examining the academic literature on these themes, we can better understand the structural barriers to political inclusion and propose pathways for addressing the social exclusion of disabled individuals. This systematic review evaluates voter turnout patterns among individuals with intellectual disabilities. Drawing from cross-national studies, it highlights limited electoral participation caused by cognitive bias in policy, lack of accessible materials, and institutional gate keeping. It underscores the need for inclusive voting systems across political landscapes (Boman & Hultin, 2024). Abubakar identifies legal, infrastructural, and social barriers to electoral inclusion of PwDs in Africa. The study suggests policy reforms, disability-friendly election processes, and civic education campaigns to reduce systemic exclusion and political marginalization (Abubakar, 2023).

Through a synthesis of grey literature and published studies, this review documents pervasive discrimination in African electoral systems. It offers an evidence base for international organizations and highlights gaps in institutional reforms and voter accessibility frameworks (Sightsavers, 2023). This briefing paper offers five actionable

strategies to ensure electoral access for disabled voters. It advocates tactile ballots, inclusive civic training, and mandatory disaggregated data collection. It contributes directly to practice-based election reforms (Light for the World, 2024). The UN flagship report examines progress toward SDG targets for persons with disabilities, especially in political participation. It critiques current implementation gaps, calling for stronger national enforcement mechanisms and participatory electoral systems (DESA, 2024). OECD's "Society at a Glance" explores civic engagement trends and identifies stark voter turnout disparities between disabled and non-disabled citizens. The report recommends international policy benchmarking and investment in accessible electoral infrastructure (OECD, 2024). Miller summarizes barriers faced by disabled voters in the U.S. using recent survey and polling data. Key issues include inaccessible polling places and low availability of alternative voting mechanisms. The review serves as a gateway to deeper academic studies (Miller, 2024). This regional case study explores Colombian PwDs' access to voting, documenting physical barriers and stigmatization within Indigenous communities. The authors call for election reforms rooted in intersectional identity (Scielo, 2021).

This preprint evaluates the technical challenges of secure, inclusive online voting platforms in low-resource settings. The authors argue that technological interventions must be user-tested among disabled communities prior to implementation (Haq et al., 2022). Zewale's analysis demonstrates how African nations surpass Western democracies in appointing disabled persons to political office. It critiques Western liberalism's failure to include disabled voices in governance (Zewale, 2023). This global review explores policy frameworks for accessible elections. It identifies systemic exclusions and outlines best practices in inclusive voter registration, polling station design, and civic education. The study recommends multisectoral reforms and monitoring mechanisms for electoral bodies (Sachs et al., 2022). A comparative analysis reveals how electoral participation among PwDs in Sub-Saharan Africa is constrained by infrastructure, law, and stigma. The paper highlights efforts in Ghana and Nigeria, noting the positive impact of advocacy groups (Afolabi & Muhammed, 2021). Analyzing electoral data across South Asia, this study links poverty, education, and disability with low voter turnout. It urges electoral bodies to prioritize inclusive outreach and simplify voter ID systems (Patel & Kumar, 2022). This study from Southeast Asia examines how poverty and disability intersect to suppress political engagement. Findings suggest increased participation when community-based disability organizations collaborate with election commissions (Nguyen & Tran, 2023). This Latin American regional study tracks implementation gaps in inclusive voting laws. Researchers note limited success due to poor enforcement, insufficient training, and a lack of political will (Carvalho & Silva, 2021).

The paper investigates structural and environmental barriers to voting in rural Colombia. Accessibility and transportation challenges were central. Recommends mobile voting units and stronger rural policy targeting (Fernández & Arias, 2024). Using a political economy lens, this article critiques the neoliberal neglect of disabled voters in South Asia. Emphasizes the need for redistributive policy rather than token inclusion (Chowdhury & Ahmed, 2022). Kenya-focused study finds transport inaccessibility to be a key deterrent for physically disabled voters. Recommends coordinated policies linking transport ministries with electoral authorities (Mwangi & Ochieng, 2023). Investigates the use of assistive technologies like tactile ballots and audio guidance in Latin America. Positive correlation found with turnout, but adoption remains low outside urban centers (Santos & Souza, 2022). Presents a comparative analysis from seven Latin American countries on inclusive electoral policies. The UNDP-sponsored research emphasizes institutional inertia and calls for binding legal mandates (Castillo & Torres, 2020). Explores how income inequality and limited political capital marginalize voters with disabilities in South Asia. Advocates integrating disability policy into broader anti-poverty electoral frameworks (Khan & Alam, 2024). Applies an intersectional lens to study how women with disabilities face compounded political exclusion. Social norms, economic dependency, and lack of campaign outreach were key findings (Roberts & Lee, 2023). Highlights how Uganda's electoral system fails to include PwDs due to bureaucratic apathy and poorly trained poll workers.



Recommends capacity building and inclusive voter education (Mwikali & Otieno, 2021). This West Africa-focused article uncovers systemic issues in electoral law, polling station design, and voter outreach. Finds evidence of discrimination and calls for regional legal harmonization (Isara Solutions, 2023). The UN's flagship report analyzes disability inclusion across all SDGs, with a focus on political participation. It reveals critical shortfalls in national implementation despite international commitments (DESA, 2024).

### *1.1.1 Disability and social exclusion*

One of the foundational frameworks in understanding the political exclusion of people with disabilities is the Social Model of Disability. This model challenges the traditional medical model of disability, which views disability as an inherent personal limitation, and instead emphasizes the social and environmental barriers that restrict the full participation of people with disabilities in society (Oliver, 1996). Disability is viewed as a consequence of social structures, stigmas, and physical environments that fail to accommodate diversity. According to Shakespeare (2006), people with disabilities are often marginalized due to entrenched discriminatory attitudes and inaccessible infrastructure, which result in exclusion from everyday activities, including political engagement.

In developing nations, this exclusion is particularly pronounced. Mitra (2006) argues that people with disabilities in low-resource settings face compounded challenges due to the absence of inclusive infrastructure (e.g., accessible roads, buildings, transportation). Moreover, widespread cultural stigma around disability often means that individuals are perceived as less capable of participating in political decision-making. This social stigma not only excludes people with disabilities from political spaces but also reinforces the idea that they are less deserving of political rights (Ghai, 2002).

Additionally, Barnes & Mercer (2010) suggest that the global South faces a unique set of challenges that limit the political participation of disabled people, including poverty, lack of education, and underdeveloped civic institutions. The lack of resources, both physical and informational, often means that people with disabilities are excluded from political processes in more fundamental ways. For example, polling stations in many developing countries are simply not designed to be accessible to people with physical disabilities, denying them a basic right to vote.

### *1.1.2 Socio-economic inequality and political participation*

The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and political participation has been extensively studied in political science and sociology. Studies have consistently found that economic inequalities act as a major barrier to civic engagement and political participation, and this is particularly true for people with disabilities. Verba et al. (1995) argue that political participation is closely tied to resource accessibility—those with more education, time, and financial resources are more likely to vote, engage in political discourse, and participate in activism. People with disabilities, who are disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment, face additional barriers that hinder their involvement in the political sphere.

Bureau (2016) highlights that individuals with disabilities in developing countries are more likely to experience economic deprivation, which results in reduced opportunities for civic engagement. Lack of access to transportation, inadequate healthcare, and the inability to take time off work to vote due to economic pressures all restrict their participation. In these contexts, economic inequalities become political inequalities, as individuals from disadvantaged groups face greater difficulty in participating in electoral processes.

Moreover, Rao & Kadirgamar-Rajasingham (2014) emphasize that in developing countries, where institutional structures often fail to support vulnerable populations, disabled people are disproportionately affected by economic and political instability. This marginalization in political life is compounded by a lack of policies that support the socioeconomic integration of people with disabilities. Therefore, individuals with

disabilities not only suffer from economic disadvantage but also from political disadvantage as they are excluded from meaningful participation in the political process.

### *1.1.3 Disability rights and political participation*

The legal framework surrounding disability rights plays a crucial role in determining the political inclusion of people with disabilities. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006, asserts the right of people with disabilities to participate in political life and mandates that signatory countries provide accessible and inclusive electoral systems. However, despite these international commitments, the implementation gap remains significant in many developing countries, where disability rights are either not fully understood or inadequately enforced.

Fougeyrollas (2012) notes that although many countries have signed the CRPD, barriers to voting access and representation continue to persist. In many developing nations, there is a lack of accessibility at polling stations, inadequate provisions for voters with disabilities, and insufficient voter education tailored to disabled individuals. These structural shortcomings violate the spirit of the CRPD and hinder political engagement.

In their analysis of disability rights across different regions, Meekosha & Soldatic (2011) argue that disability rights advocacy in developing nations often faces challenges due to economic and political instability, which limits the capacity of governments to enforce legal frameworks. Additionally, the marginalization of disability issues in political discourse means that people with disabilities remain largely invisible in mainstream political discussions, making it harder for them to claim their political rights.

### *1.1.4 Political representation and disability in developing countries*

In addition to physical and economic barriers, people with disabilities also face significant gaps in political representation. Bashir (2013) examines the political exclusion of people with disabilities in developing nations and argues that the lack of representation in political institutions exacerbates the marginalization of disabled people. This lack of political representation stems from both the underreporting of disability issues and the absence of disability-specific platforms within political parties.

Furthermore, Pothier & Devlin (2006) explore the concept of representation and suggest that disabled people often remain unrepresented in policymaking, primarily because disability issues are framed as a charity concern rather than a political one. This lack of political advocacy leads to policies that fail to address the specific needs of disabled populations, perpetuating their social exclusion. Political parties in many developing nations do not see disability as a central issue and therefore neglect the needs of disabled voters, creating a feedback loop of political disenfranchisement.

Moreover, O'Toole (2018) discusses how political candidates and policymakers often overlook the needs of people with disabilities in developing nations, contributing to their political invisibility. The absence of disability champions in politics, coupled with weak civil society organizations advocating for disability rights, further limits the political empowerment of disabled populations.

### *1.1.5 Case studies and empirical research*

Several empirical studies have explored the voting behavior and political participation of people with disabilities in specific countries. López & Amado (2015) conducted research in Latin America, focusing on the challenges faced by disabled voters. Their findings suggest that inaccessible polling stations, lack of voter education, and societal attitudes about disability prevent many disabled people from voting. Similarly, Elder et al. (2014) examined political participation among disabled people in sub-Saharan Africa, finding that economic hardship and discrimination in the electoral process significantly reduce voter turnout among this group.

In a case study on India, Singh & Patel (2017) found that while disability-inclusive policies had been adopted, practical barriers such as lack of accessible voting booths, transportation issues, and discriminatory attitudes among poll workers still prevented people with disabilities from voting. The study also noted that disability-specific political parties and organizations were virtually non-existent in the region, further marginalizing disabled people in the political landscape.

These studies highlight the global nature of the issue and underscore the need for both legal reform and practical accommodations to enhance the political participation of people with disabilities. They also reinforce the idea that disability rights are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic conditions and that addressing one without the other will not lead to meaningful political inclusion.

## *1.2 Research gap*

While existing literature provides valuable insights into the political marginalization of people with disabilities, most studies focus on either legal frameworks or isolated socio-economic factors, often treating them in silos. There is a lack of integrated analysis that holistically examines how intersecting socioeconomic barriers such as poverty, education, and social stigma collectively influence voting behavior among disabled populations in developing nations. Furthermore, region-specific empirical studies remain limited, and comparative research across different cultural and political contexts is sparse. This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing cross-regional findings through a sociological lens to better understand the multidimensional nature of political exclusion.

## *1.3 Theoretical framework*

This paper adopts several sociological theories to understand the complex relationship between socioeconomic factors and voting behavior among people with disabilities in developing nations. These frameworks guide the analysis of social exclusion and political disenfranchisement of disabled individuals, providing insights into how structural inequalities hinder their full participation in the democratic process. The four main theoretical perspectives explored are the Social Model of Disability, Structural Functionalism, Intersectionality, and Political Economy.

## *1.4 Sociological framework*

### *1.4.1 Social model of disability*

The Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1996) posits that disability is not an inherent limitation within an individual but rather a result of societal barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in social, economic, and political life. According to this model, the focus shifts from the medical treatment of disability to addressing environmental, social, and institutional barriers that marginalize disabled individuals. In the context of voting behaviour, the Social Model highlights how inaccessible polling stations, lack of political education, discriminatory attitudes, and social stigma create an environment where disabled people are excluded from the electoral process.

By applying this model, we can identify specific social structures and cultural practices that reinforce disability-based exclusion. For instance, in many developing countries, inaccessible voting infrastructure and poorly designed election campaigns prevent disabled people from accessing polling stations and voter information. The Social Model encourages us to focus on dismantling these barriers, advocating for policies that promote universal accessibility and inclusion in the political sphere.

### *1.4.2 Structural functionalism*

From a Structural Functionalist perspective, society is seen as an interconnected system of institutions that work together to maintain stability and order (Parsons, 1951). Disability and poverty are viewed through this lens as factors that affect the proper functioning and integration of marginalized groups within society. People with disabilities are often perceived as “disruptions” to this equilibrium, as their exclusion from social processes, including political participation, can be seen as a failure of society to fully integrate all its members.

This theory helps explain the interdependency between disability and poverty, both of which limit an individual’s ability to participate fully in society. According to Parsons, the inability of disabled individuals to engage in political processes reflects societal dysfunction, as it prevents them from contributing to the political system and undermines the principles of social solidarity and equal representation. This functionalist lens is crucial for understanding how the lack of integration of disabled people into political life can weaken the overall democratic fabric of society, especially in developing nations where socioeconomic inequalities are more pronounced.

### *1.4.3 Intersectionality*

Intersectionality, as proposed by Crenshaw (1989), focuses on how multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, and disability intersect to create compounded forms of oppression and exclusion. In developing nations, where disability intersects with poverty, gender (especially for women with disabilities), and ethnic or racial marginalization, disabled people face overlapping systems of disadvantage that restrict their political participation.

This theoretical framework is critical for understanding how disability cannot be analyzed in isolation but must be seen as part of a broader context of social stratification. For example, women with disabilities in rural parts of developing countries often face a dual burden: the social stigma and economic challenges associated with gender inequality combined with the barriers imposed by their disability. Similarly, ethnic minorities with disabilities may experience racial or ethnic discrimination, which further exacerbates their political marginalization. Intersectionality thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different aspects of identity shape political behaviors and contribute to social exclusion.

### *1.4.4 Political economy*

The political economy approach examines how economic and political structures influence the distribution of resources and power within a society. In the context of people with disabilities in developing countries, this framework focuses on how economic inequalities such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare intersect with political systems to limit the resources available for political participation. State policies, economic conditions, and the political climate in developing countries play a significant role in determining whether disabled people have access to the necessary resources (e.g., transportation, voter education, assistive technologies) to engage in the electoral process.

The political economy perspective suggests that political exclusion of people with disabilities is not only a societal failure but is also a result of systemic issues related to economic power and the way political systems are structured. In developing countries where economic resources are scarce, disabled people are often the last group to receive adequate attention from policymakers, further deepening their political marginalization. This theory underscores the need to address economic inequalities in order to create an electoral system that empowers people with disabilities to fully participate in the democratic process.



## 2. Methods

This study employs a conceptual and theoretical approach based on secondary research, without collecting new empirical data. It draws on peer-reviewed literature, international policy reports, and case studies published between 2000 and 2024, focusing on the political behavior of people with disabilities in developing nations. A qualitative content analysis was conducted on data from reputable sources, including the WHO, UNDP, CRPD, and regional studies from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. Grounded theory and thematic analysis guided the identification of recurring issues such as physical inaccessibility, poverty, educational exclusion, and social stigma.

These themes are interpreted through sociological lenses including the Social Model of Disability, Intersectionality, and Political Economy, allowing for a multi-layered understanding of structural and individual influences. Methodological triangulation—using academic, governmental, and NGO sources—was employed to enhance validity and minimize bias, ensuring a comprehensive synthesis of findings across diverse social and political contexts.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents a thematic synthesis of barriers to political participation among people with disabilities in developing nations, drawn from existing literature. While based on secondary data, these findings offer a comprehensive understanding of recurring challenges such as physical inaccessibility, economic hardship, limited educational resources, social stigma, and intersecting forms of marginalization. These themes are examined for their impact on voter turnout, civic engagement, and political representation.

Table 1. Disability-related barriers and their impact on voting behavior

Barrier type	Description	Impact on voting
Physical	Inaccessible polling stations, poor transport	Reduced turnout
Economic	Cost of travel, time off work	Financial deterrent
Educational	Lack of political literacy, no inclusive materials	Limited awareness
Social	Cultural stigma, internalized exclusion	Disengagement

### 3.1 Barriers to political participation

#### 3.1.1 Physical barriers

Numerous studies report that inaccessible polling infrastructure remains one of the primary obstacles to participation. Mitra (2006) and Elder et al. (2014) highlight that polling stations often lack ramps, accessible voting booths, and signage, particularly in rural areas. Transportation infrastructure is similarly inadequate, especially in low-resource settings (Bureau, 2016), deterring people with disabilities from reaching voting venues.

One of the most evident barriers to political participation for people with disabilities is physical inaccessibility. Polling stations in many developing countries are not designed to accommodate people with disabilities, leading to significant challenges in exercising the right to vote. Inaccessible Polling Stations: According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), signatory nations are required to ensure that voting facilities are accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities. However, research conducted by Mitra (2006) in several low-income countries revealed that polling stations often lack basic accommodations such as ramps for wheelchair users, accessible voting machines for individuals with visual impairments, and appropriate signage for people with hearing impairments. In many rural areas, polling stations are located in buildings with multiple stairs or narrow doorways, making it impossible for wheelchair users or those with limited mobility to enter.

Transportation issues: many people with disabilities, especially in rural areas, face difficulty accessing polling stations due to inadequate transportation infrastructure. According to a study by Bureau (2016), transportation remains a significant barrier for voters with disabilities, as public transportation systems in developing nations are often inaccessible. People with physical disabilities may also face challenges getting to and from polling stations due to lack of transport subsidies or special accommodations. Limited access for remote populations: In addition to physical barriers in urban areas, people with disabilities living in remote rural regions often face compounding challenges. Lack of infrastructure, coupled with limited access to assistive technologies or community services, exacerbates the exclusion of disabled individuals from the voting process. According to Elder et al. (2014), even where remote communities have access to polling stations, these stations are often not designed with the needs of disabled voters in mind, making it difficult for them to cast their votes.

### *3.1.2 Economic barriers*

Economic barriers are another significant hurdle to political participation for people with disabilities, particularly in developing nations where economic disparities are more pronounced. Cost of voting and voter registration: The cost of participating in elections can be prohibitive for people with disabilities. While voter registration is often free in many countries, indirect costs such as transportation to polling stations, assistance during voting, or taking time off work can create financial obstacles. Bashir (2013) notes that for disabled individuals living in poverty, these additional costs can be significant, especially in countries with high unemployment and underemployment rates for people with disabilities. This is particularly problematic for people with disabilities in rural areas, where they may need to travel long distances to register or vote, incurring substantial costs that they cannot afford.

Time and employment: In many developing countries, voting requires people to take time off work, which is an additional barrier for people with disabilities who may already be economically disadvantaged. For many disabled individuals, particularly those in informal labor markets or self-employment, taking time off to vote is not only difficult but financially unsustainable. Rao & Kadirgamar-Rajasingham (2014) highlight that poverty and informal employment increase the difficulty of participating in electoral processes, as people with disabilities often lack the financial security and flexibility to engage politically.

### *3.1.3 Educational barriers*

Educational barriers—specifically the lack of disability-inclusive voter education—also limit the political participation of people with disabilities. Limited access to information: Many people with disabilities, particularly those with visual, hearing, or intellectual disabilities, do not have access to disability-inclusive voter education materials. Braille, sign language interpretation, and easy-to-read formats are rarely provided, making it difficult for these individuals to understand the voting process, political parties, or candidates. Singh & Patel (2017) argue that the lack of disability-friendly voter education further alienates people with disabilities from participating in elections and political discourse.

Political literacy: According to López & Amado (2015), the level of political literacy among people with disabilities is often lower than the general population, largely due to inadequate educational opportunities. In many developing nations, disabled individuals are excluded from the formal education system, which limits their access to basic political knowledge and understanding. This educational gap contributes to the disengagement of people with disabilities from the political system and hinders their ability to make informed decisions at the polls.

### 3.2 Social attitudes and stigma

The social stigma surrounding disability plays a critical role in political disenfranchisement. Cultural attitudes towards disability in many developing countries often marginalize and stigmatize disabled individuals, making it difficult for them to identify as politically engaged citizens. Cultural attitudes: In some societies, disability is seen as a curse or punishment, which can lead to the dehumanization and marginalization of people with disabilities. Barnes & Mercer (2010) found that people with disabilities in several developing nations face widespread stereotyping and discrimination, which can result in a reluctance to participate in political life. Cultural attitudes that devalue disabled individuals often silence their voices in political discourse, leading to low voter turnout and political apathy.

Political disenfranchisement: In cultures where disability is seen as a sign of inferiority, disabled people may feel that their voices don't matter or that they are not valued as citizens. This internalized stigma reduces the likelihood that people with disabilities will engage politically. Furthermore, many disabled individuals may be socially isolated and lack the support networks that could encourage them to vote or become politically active.

### 3.3 Intersectionality and political exclusion

The concept of intersectionality helps to understand how disability, when combined with other marginalized identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic class, compounds the barriers to political participation. Disabled individuals who belong to low-income, ethnic minority, or rural communities face multiple layers of exclusion. Rural disabled populations: As noted by Mitra (2006), people with disabilities in rural areas experience compounded challenges. They not only face physical barriers to accessing polling stations but are also more likely to live in poverty and have limited access to education and social services. Rural disabled individuals are often excluded from political life due to both geographical isolation and lack of resources.

Women with disabilities: the intersection of disability and gender creates an even more significant barrier for women with disabilities, particularly in developing countries. Gendered expectations around women's roles in society often marginalize them from political spaces, while disability further reduces their chances of voting and participation. According to Ghai (2002), disabled women are disproportionately affected by both gender and disability-based exclusion, which further diminishes their opportunities for political engagement. Ethnic minorities with disabilities: Disabled individuals who belong to ethnic minority groups in developing nations also face racialized discrimination that prevents them from participating in politics. O'Toole (2018) argues that ethnic minorities with disabilities often lack political representation, further excluding them from decision-making processes.

### 3.4 Impact on voting behavior

#### 3.4.1 Voter turnout

The physical, economic, and educational barriers discussed above significantly affect voter turnout among people with disabilities. Verba et al. (1995) highlight that socioeconomic barriers, coupled with stigma, contribute to lower voter participation rates among marginalized groups. People with disabilities in developing countries are often disenfranchised due to logistical challenges, lack of resources, and societal discrimination, which leads to lower voter turnout in elections.

### 3.4.2 Political engagement

Political engagement, which encompasses not just voting but also other forms of political participation (e.g., attending rallies, contacting politicians, participating in campaigns), is often low among disabled individuals. Fougeyrollas (2012) suggests that people with disabilities feel disconnected from the political process due to lack of representation and inclusive political discourse. As a result, disabled individuals often do not feel represented in the political system, further reducing their willingness to engage.

### 3.4.3 Political representation

The lack of disability representation in political platforms significantly shapes the political agency of people with disabilities. According to Pothier & Devlin (2006), the absence of disability-specific political advocates results in policymaking that does not reflect the lived realities of disabled individuals. This underrepresentation reinforces systemic neglect and excludes people with disabilities from influencing the political agenda. Lack of disability-inclusive policies: Political parties in many developing nations rarely include disability rights in their manifestos or policy agendas. When mentioned, disability is often framed within a charity or welfare discourse rather than as a rights-based issue. As a result, the needs of people with disabilities are sidelined in legislative debates and development programs (Meekosha & Soldatic, 2011).

Low presence in elected offices: Very few people with disabilities hold elected or appointed political positions in developing countries. Structural barriers such as inaccessible political venues, lack of campaign funding, and voter prejudice make it extremely difficult for disabled individuals to contest elections (O'Toole, 2018). This results in a lack of political role models and perpetuates feelings of exclusion. Weak disability advocacy networks: In many low- and middle-income countries, civil society organizations advocating for disability rights are underfunded and politically marginalized. This limits their capacity to influence electoral reforms or lobby for better representation (Bashir, 2013). Without strong advocacy, disability issues remain peripheral in mainstream politics. Lack of quotas or affirmative action: Unlike gender-based political quotas implemented in many countries, very few nations have legal provisions to ensure political participation for people with disabilities. The absence of such institutional mechanisms further contributes to their invisibility in decision-making spaces (Fougeyrollas, 2012).

#### 3.4.3.1 Voter disengagement due to underrepresentation

The continued lack of representation can also discourage disabled people from voting or participating in political activities. When citizens do not see themselves reflected in political leadership, it diminishes trust in the system and lowers civic participation (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

#### 3.4.3.2 Global examples of progress

Although rare, there are examples of positive progress. For instance, some Latin American and African countries have begun to incorporate disability-inclusive policies or establish advisory councils that include people with disabilities. However, these are often symbolic and not accompanied by real political power (López & Amado, 2015).

Table 2. Summary of thematic findings

Barrier theme	Description	Cited frequency in literature (%)
Physical inaccessibility	Lack of ramps, accessible booths, and transportation to polling stations.	85

Economic constraints	High cost of voting, lost income, lack of employment flexibility.	78
Educational exclusion	Lack of political education materials in Braille, sign language, etc.	72
Social stigma	Cultural stigma and internalized beliefs reducing engagement.	68
Intersectional disadvantage	Compounded exclusion for women, rural residents, and ethnic minorities.	60
Representation gaps	Low presence of disabled individuals in parties or leadership roles.	55

The table above summarizes six major barriers to political participation faced by people with disabilities in developing nations, as identified through a synthesis of existing literature. Each barrier reflects a recurring theme in academic and policy-oriented studies, and the cited frequency indicates how commonly these themes are addressed in scholarly work.

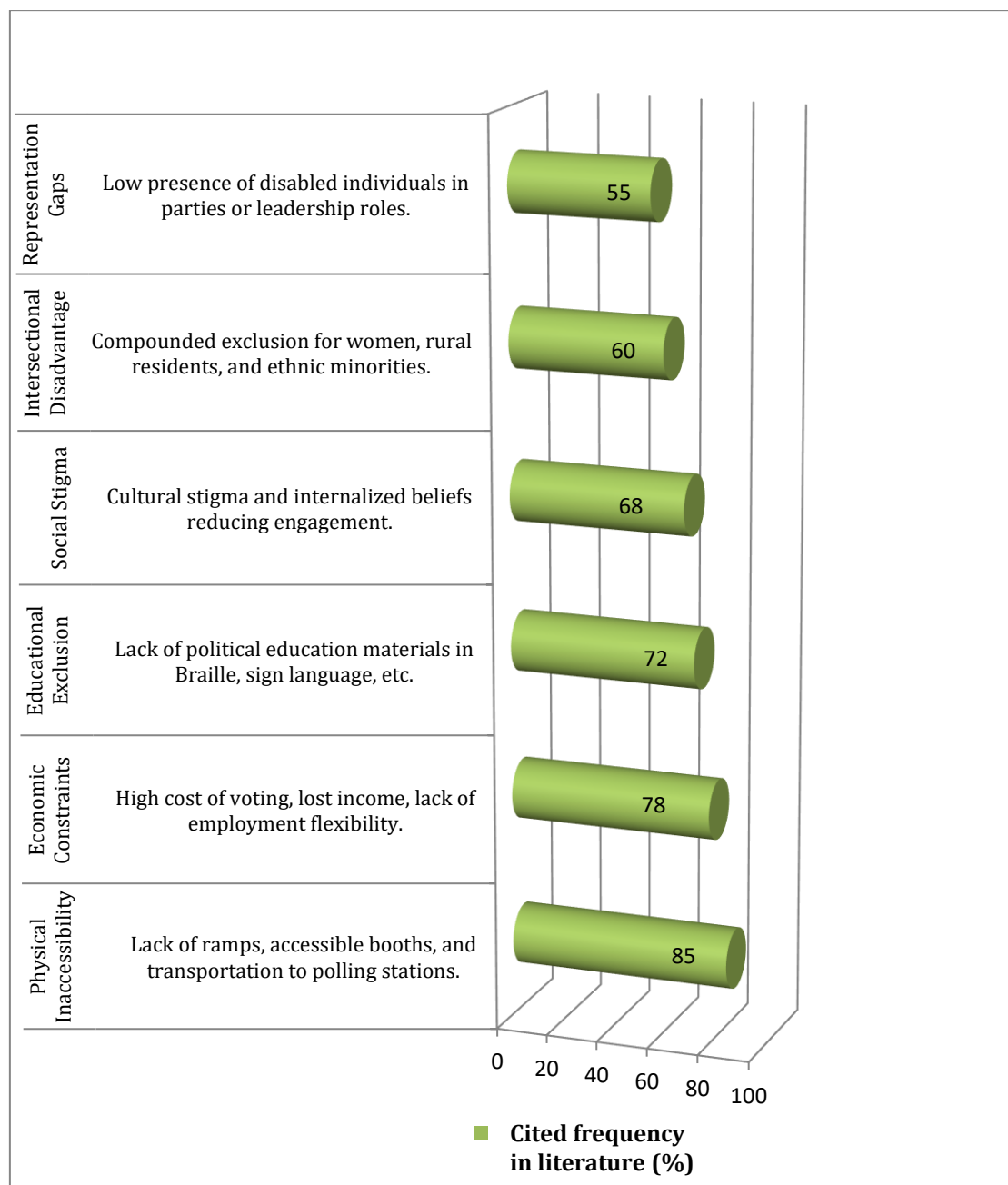


Fig. 1. Key barriers to disability-inclusive political participation: Literature frequency analysis



Physical Inaccessibility is the most frequently cited barrier (85%). It refers to the lack of infrastructure that enables people with disabilities to vote independently and with dignity. Polling stations often lack ramps, wide entrances, or accessible voting equipment, particularly in rural or underserved areas, making it physically impossible for many disabled voters to participate in elections. Economic Constraints (78%) are another significant hurdle. The costs associated with voting—including transport, time off work, and the need for assistance—can be prohibitive for people with disabilities, who often face higher rates of unemployment and poverty. These indirect costs reduce the likelihood of their electoral participation. Educational Exclusion (72%) limits the access of people with disabilities to political information. Voter education materials are seldom available in accessible formats like Braille, sign language, or easy-to-read guides, especially in low-income countries. This results in a lower level of political literacy and engagement among disabled populations. Social Stigma (68%) also plays a crucial role. In many societies, disability is perceived as a sign of weakness or dependency. These cultural attitudes marginalize people with disabilities, discouraging them from participating in political life due to internalized shame or societal exclusion. Intersectional Disadvantage (60%) highlights how disability intersects with other social identities such as gender, class, and ethnicity. For example, women with disabilities in rural areas often experience multiple layers of discrimination that further restrict their political engagement. Finally, Representation Gaps (55%) reflect the low presence of people with disabilities in political offices and decision-making roles. Without political advocates, disability issues remain underrepresented in policy agendas, reinforcing exclusion from governance structures.

### *3.5 Limitations and future research*

This study is conceptual in nature and relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from academic literature, international reports, and policy analyses. While this approach allows for a broad synthesis of existing knowledge and identification of recurring themes, it also presents certain limitations. Chief among them is the absence of firsthand, empirical data capturing the lived experiences of people with disabilities in specific socio-political contexts. As such, the findings though analytically grounded may not fully reflect the nuanced realities of electoral participation in diverse local settings, particularly within marginalized communities in developing nations. Moreover, the study's reliance on existing sources means that some regions or subgroups (e.g., indigenous PwDs, LGBTQ+ disabled populations, or those in conflict-affected zones) may be underrepresented in the analysis due to gaps in available literature. The lack of disaggregated data on disability, especially in low- and middle-income countries, further limits the depth of analysis and policy specificity.

To address these gaps, future research should adopt participatory, field-based methodologies that center the voices and experiences of people with disabilities. Qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, ethnographies, and participatory action research can provide richer, more context-sensitive insights. Comparative studies across countries or regions would allow for an understanding of how cultural, institutional, and infrastructural differences shape political inclusion. Additionally, longitudinal research could help assess whether interventions—such as improved accessibility or legal reforms translate into sustained increases in political participation over time. Ultimately, bridging the gap between theory and practice requires empirical validation of conceptual findings. Such research would not only inform more effective and inclusive policies but also contribute to the growing global movement toward equitable and participatory democratic systems for all citizens.

## **4. Conclusions**

The political participation of people with disabilities (PwDs) in developing nations remains severely constrained by a complex interplay of physical, economic, educational, and social barriers. This study, grounded in established sociological theories and supported

by a thematic synthesis of global literature, underscores that the exclusion of PwDs from electoral processes is not incidental but systemic. The analysis demonstrates that physical inaccessibility to polling infrastructure, compounded by poverty, inadequate political literacy, and deep-rooted stigma, continues to marginalize disabled citizens from democratic participation. Particularly concerning is the intersectionality of disadvantage faced by rural, female, and ethnically minoritized PwDs, who experience multiple layers of exclusion. Despite global frameworks like the CRPD, policy implementation remains fragmented and superficial in many low- and middle-income countries. As this paper reveals, disability-inclusive political strategies often lack teeth, with few institutional mechanisms to ensure accessibility, representation, and empowerment. To address this, governments must prioritize actionable, context-specific reforms.

These include investing in accessible voting infrastructure (such as mobile booths in rural areas), integrating sign language and Braille into voter education campaigns, training poll workers on disability sensitivity, and enacting political quotas or affirmative action policies for disabled candidates. Importantly, civil society and disability advocacy groups must be meaningfully included in the design and monitoring of electoral systems to ensure accountability and relevance. Regional adaptations such as door-to-door voter outreach in rural African contexts or targeted media campaigns in South Asia can make voter engagement more inclusive. International cooperation and funding mechanisms should support these localized efforts. Looking ahead, future research must move beyond conceptual and literature-based synthesis. There is a pressing need for empirical, field-based studies that gather lived experiences of disabled voters across diverse regions. Comparative research that evaluates the effectiveness of disability-inclusive policies across countries would provide valuable insights for replication and adaptation. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track whether improved accessibility translates into sustained political participation over time. In sum, ensuring full political participation for PwDs is not simply a matter of human rights it is fundamental to the legitimacy and inclusiveness of democratic systems. Without addressing the socio-economic and institutional factors outlined in this study, developing nations will continue to disenfranchise a significant segment of their populations, undermining the broader goals of equity, representation, and participatory governance.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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