

Navigating Work and Worth: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Workers with Disabilities in Sierra Leone

Fassie Manju^{a*} and Eric Komba Foyoh Mani^b

^a*Njala University, Sierra Leone;* ^b*Eastern Technical University, Sierra Leone. Corresponding author- Email: fassiemanju@gmail.com*

Employment policy often treats inclusion as entry into a job, yet this assumption is poorly matched to labour markets in which informal and survival-oriented livelihoods predominate. This study examines what work means in the lives of workers with disabilities in Sierra Leone and how embodiment, time, recognition, social relations, and material insecurity shape that meaning. Guided by van Manen-informed hermeneutic phenomenology, the study drew on 30 in-depth interviews and workplace or livelihood "go-along" observations in Freetown and Moyamba District. Reflexive thematic analysis was used as an interpretive procedure within a phenomenological orientation, with attention to lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relations. Four themes were developed: (1) work as embodied negotiation of inaccessible space and compressed time; (2) work as a struggle for recognition, dignity, and a credible worker identity; (3) precarious agency within a moral economy of hustling, subsistence, and begging; and (4) relationally constituted work shaped by gender, impairment, kinship, and geography. The findings show that work can affirm contribution and self-worth while simultaneously imposing substantial physical, temporal, emotional, and relational costs. We describe these additional efforts as "access work": the largely unpaid labour required to reach, perform, and retain livelihood activity in disabling environments. The analysis supports the social model of disability's focus on barriers but also demonstrates the need to account for impairment effects, informal political economy, and African relational understandings of personhood and obligation. The study does not claim national representativeness; rather, it offers a contextually grounded account of how employment inclusion is lived in two Sierra Leonean settings.

Keywords: disability; employment; lived experience; hermeneutic phenomenology; Sierra Leone; informal economy; capability approach; critical disability studies.

Introduction

The right to work on an equal basis with others is established in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Nevertheless, labour-market participation remains substantially lower for persons with disabilities than for persons without disabilities, and the former are more likely to encounter insecure work, low pay, and

limited social protection (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2025; Vornholt et al., 2018). Much of the employment literature has been developed around formal recruitment, workplace accommodation, and anti-discrimination enforcement. These concerns are important, but they do not fully capture contexts in which most workers earn livelihoods through agriculture, petty trade, casual work, household enterprise, or other informal arrangements.

Sierra Leone makes this conceptual problem especially visible. The country combines a post-conflict history of war-related impairment with disability arising from illness, accidents, ageing, and limited access to health care. The 2015 Population and Housing Census recorded 93,129 persons with disabilities, equivalent to 1.3% of the population; 67% lived in rural areas, and 63% of persons with disabilities aged three years or older had never attended school (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2018). These figures are measurement-sensitive and likely understate disability when compared with functional-difficulty approaches used in contemporary disability statistics. The same official report stated that persons with disabilities constituted 1.8% of people recorded as working, but this figure should not be read as a formal-employment rate. The absence of robust, current, disability-disaggregated labour data is itself a significant policy and research limitation.

The legal context also requires precision. Sierra Leone's Persons with Disability Act, 2011 prohibits discrimination and provides tax incentives for employers that hire persons with disabilities or make workplace modifications. Contrary to the claim in the original manuscript, the Act does not establish a 5% public-sector employment quota. In 2025, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities asked Sierra Leone to report on measures to increase open-labour-market employment and on the implementation of the Act's employer tax deductions, indicating that employment implementation remains under formal international scrutiny (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2025).

Existing studies in Sierra Leone and neighbouring African contexts document inaccessible environments, educational exclusion, stigma, weak policy implementation, and dependence on informal livelihoods (Austin, 2023; Berghs, 2016; Morwane et al., 2021; Naami, 2015; Ocran, 2022). However, cataloguing barriers does not by itself explain how work is lived: how a working day is felt in the body; how waiting, fatigue, and assistance alter time; how employment becomes a claim to adult identity and social recognition; or how people interpret the unstable boundary between work, entrepreneurship, family obligation, and begging. These questions are phenomenological because they concern the structure and meaning of experience, not only the frequency of obstacles.

This article therefore asks: (1) how do workers with disabilities experience and interpret the meaning of work in their everyday lives? (2) How are embodiment, temporality, spatial access, and social relations constituted through working? And (3) how do gender, impairment,

livelihood form, and rural-urban location shape agency and recognition? The article contributes in three ways. Empirically, it centres workers in an under-researched post-conflict setting. Analytically, it moves beyond a barrier inventory by examining work through lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived relations. Theoretically, it brings the social model of disability into dialogue with critical and decolonial disability studies, an interactional account of impairment effects, African relational thought, and the capability approach.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Disability, employment, and informal political economy.

Research across low- and middle-income countries consistently identifies inaccessible transport and workplaces, limited education and vocational training, discriminatory employer attitudes, weak implementation of disability law, and inadequate assistive technology as barriers to employment (Morwane et al., 2021). Yet the category "employment" can obscure the economic realities of the Global South. In Sierra Leone, informal employment accounts for the overwhelming majority of work, meaning that stable contracts, employer-provided accommodation, and social insurance are exceptional rather than standard. For many persons with disabilities, self-employment and micro-enterprise are not simply expressions of entrepreneurial preference; they are responses to exclusion from formal labour markets and to the absence of reliable social protection.

African studies also show that disability and work are gendered and socially stratified. In Ghana, disability stigma operates through both interpersonal encounters and institutional arrangements, including assumptions about competence and respectability (Naami, 2015; Ocran, 2022). Evidence from Malawi similarly demonstrates that progressive policy can coexist with inaccessible education, employment practices, and uneven implementation (Wanggren et al., 2023). These studies are valuable, but much of the literature still treats barriers, employment status, and programme participation as the primary objects of analysis. Less attention is paid to the lived constitution of worker identity, the bodily cost of access, or the moral distinctions through which persons with disabilities evaluate different livelihood strategies.

Sierra Leone: post-conflict embodiment and livelihood.

Sierra Leone's disability landscape is shaped, but not exhausted, by the civil war of 1991-2002. The public figure of the amputee remains tied to embodied memory, humanitarian intervention, reparations, and contested national narratives (Berghs, 2016). Focusing only on war-related amputation, however, risks marginalising people with sensory, psychosocial, congenital, illness-related, and accident-related impairments. It can also reproduce a hierarchy in which

visible conflict injuries are treated as more socially intelligible or deserving than other impairments.

Research in Freetown's informal settlements demonstrates how limited access to assistive technology, inaccessible terrain, poverty, and stigma interact to restrict mobility and participation (Austin, 2023). Rural contexts generate different relations: livelihoods may be organised through land, farming, kinship, and reciprocal obligation rather than through an identifiable formal employer. Urban anonymity may permit greater independence while also intensifying competition and weakening familial safety nets. A rural-urban comparison therefore cannot be reduced to a simple contrast between deprivation and opportunity.

From the social model to critical, decolonial, and relational disability studies.

The social model remains an essential starting point because it relocates disadvantage from individual deficit to disabling social organisation. It directs attention to inaccessible buildings, transport, recruitment systems, and attitudes rather than treating exclusion as the natural consequence of impairment. However, a singular reliance on the social model can flatten the empirical material in two ways. First, participants may experience pain, fatigue, sensory overload, or episodic distress that cannot be explained solely as externally imposed barriers. Second, the model emerged within particular Northern political histories and can overprivilege individual independence, formal rights, and wage employment as universal measures of inclusion.

Critical Disability Studies extends the analysis to ableism, political economy, embodiment, intersectionality, and the production of normality (Goodley, 2013). Interactional and critical realist approaches retain the political insight of the social model while recognising that impairment effects and social barriers are mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive (Shakespeare, 2014; Thomas, 2007). This approach is especially relevant to accounts in which an inaccessible road increases pain, a long walk intensifies fatigue, or an episodic psychosocial condition interacts with inflexible work expectations.

Decolonial and Global South disability scholarship further cautions against treating Northern disability concepts as context-free universals (Chataika, 2012; Grech, 2015; Meekosha, 2011). Colonial histories, economic dependency, humanitarian governance, and informal labour shape which bodies are valued, and which forms of work are recognised. African relational scholarship also questions the equation of autonomy with self-sufficiency. Onazi (2020), for example, conceptualises disability justice through community, relationships, and obligations. This does not romanticise family or community, which may support, discipline, exploit, or exclude. Rather, it makes interdependence an object of analysis.

Capability, intersectionality, and phenomenological sensitising concepts.

The capability approach provides an evaluative language for asking what people are substantively able to be and do, rather than assuming that possession of a job or resource automatically produces well-being (Burchardt, 2004; Mitra, 2006; Sen, 1999). Personal, social, and environmental conversion factors determine whether a resource becomes a real opportunity. For a person with disabilities, a formal appointment may not become a meaningful capability when transport is inaccessible, toilets cannot be used, pain is unmanaged, or stigma makes continued employment psychologically costly.

Intersectionality directs attention to how disability is co-constituted with gender, impairment type, livelihood position, and geography rather than added to them as a separate disadvantage. Phenomenologically, the analysis attends to van Manen's (2016) lifeworld existentials: lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived relation. These were used as sensitising questions, not as predetermined coding categories. Together, the frameworks allow the study to analyse structural barriers without erasing embodiment, to examine agency without romanticising resilience, and to understand work as both economic activity and a relational claim to worth.

Methodology

Study design and methodological congruence.

The study used interpretive, or hermeneutic, phenomenology informed by van Manen (2016). The aim was not to produce a context-free essence of disability or employment, but to interpret recurrent structures of meaning in participants' situated accounts of working. The guiding phenomenological question was: What is it like to sustain a livelihood as a person with disabilities in these settings, and how does work disclose the body, time, space, self, and others? Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used as the practical procedure for developing patterned interpretations across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). RTA was not treated as a generic method for listing barriers. Methodological congruence was maintained by coding experiential episodes, repeatedly returning from parts of the text to the whole account, writing phenomenological memos, and asking how each provisional theme illuminated the lived meaning of work. Themes were understood as researcher-produced interpretive constructions rather than objective entities that simply "emerged" from the data.

Setting and researcher positionality.

Fieldwork was conducted between February and August 2024 in Freetown and Moyamba District. Freetown included government offices, non-governmental organisations, markets,

roadside enterprises, and informal settlements. Moyamba provided a rural setting in which farming, petty trade, kin-based support, and limited transport infrastructure structured livelihood possibilities. The two sites were selected for contrast rather than statistical representation.

The first author is a Sierra Leonean researcher with long-standing engagement with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). This position supported linguistic and cultural access but also created risks of assumed familiarity, advocacy alignment, and gatekeeper influence. A reflexive journal documented expectations, emotional responses, instances of over-identification, and changes in interpretation. Peer discussions were used to challenge readings that treated participants only as victims of exclusion or, conversely, romanticised adaptation as resilience.

Sampling, recruitment, and sample adequacy.

Maximum-variation purposive sampling sought diversity in impairment, gender, livelihood form, and location. Eligibility required participants to be aged 18 years or older, self-identify as disabled, and be currently engaged in income-generating activity broadly defined to include formal employment, self-employment, casual work, farming, petty trading, phone charging, craft production, and begging. Recruitment occurred through DPO networks, participant referral, and direct outreach in markets and informal settlements. Combining these routes reduced, but did not eliminate, the likelihood that the sample would consist only of people already connected to disability organisations.

The final sample comprised 30 participants: 18 men and 12 women; 16 in Freetown and 14 in Moyamba. Reported impairment groups were mobility impairments (n=12), visual impairments (n=7), hearing impairments (n=5), psychosocial disabilities (n=4), and multiple impairments (n=2). Ages ranged from 22 to 62 years. The sample was not designed to estimate prevalence or represent all disabled workers in Sierra Leone.

Table 1: Aggregate participant characteristics

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender	Men	18
Gender	Women	12
Location	Freetown	16
Location	Moyamba District	14
Impairment	Mobility	12

Impairment	Visual	7
Impairment	Hearing	5
Impairment	Psychosocial	4
Impairment	Multiple	2

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the study does not claim that a fixed point of objective "saturation" was reached (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Recruitment concluded at 30 because the dataset provided substantial information power for the focused research aim and sufficient variation across the pre-specified experiential contrasts to support an interpretive account (Malterud et al., 2016). Later, interviews deepened and complicated the developing themes but did not require a fundamentally different thematic structure.

People with intellectual disabilities were not included in the study. The original protocol did not incorporate the adapted consent, communication, and supported decision-making procedures required for their meaningful inclusion. This boundary should be understood as a limitation of the study design, not as evidence that their working lives are less relevant. Dedicated inclusive research is required.

Data generation

Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45-120 minutes and were conducted in Krio, Mende, or English. Questions invited concrete experiential descriptions rather than general opinions. Participants were asked to describe a typical workday, moments when they felt recognised or devalued, the bodily and temporal demands of reaching and performing work, relationships with customers or colleagues, decisions about asking for help, and hopes or fears regarding future work. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission.

Five deaf participants were interviewed with support from a trained sign-language interpreter. Interpreter-mediated accounts were treated as co-produced rather than transparent reproductions of an original statement. The interpreter was briefed to preserve first-person voice and to flag terms without direct equivalence; post-interview clarification was sought where meaning remained uncertain. Because the study did not independently test inter-interpreter consistency, interpretive variation remains a limitation.

The study also used "go-along" observation (Kusenbach, 2003). The researcher accompanied participants during journeys to work, movement through markets, customer interactions, or navigation of offices. These observations provided access to spatial, bodily, and relational dimensions that participants might not verbalise because they had become routine. Field notes distinguished observed events from immediate interpretation and later analytic reflection.

Translation and analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Krio and Mende interviews were translated into English by the first author, whose linguistic and contextual knowledge enabled attention to idiom and local usage. Selected passages were checked through back-translation. Where a phrase carried several possible meanings, the original term was retained in analytical notes, and the translation decision was documented. Translation was therefore approached as interpretation rather than as a purely technical transfer of equivalent words.

Analysis proceeded iteratively. First, transcripts and field notes were read repeatedly to identify experiential episodes and initial semantic and latent codes. Second, analytic memos asked how work was lived through body, space, time, relationships, identity, and possibility. Third, provisional themes were constructed across cases and checked against complete participant accounts to avoid fragmenting quotations from their narrative context. Fourth, divergent and negative cases were actively examined, including accounts in which family dependence was supportive, formal employment was affirming, or informal work created autonomy. Fifth, the themes were placed in dialogue with the social model, interactional disability theory, decolonial and relational scholarship, intersectionality, and the capability approach. NVivo 14 supported data management but did not generate themes.

Preliminary interpretations were discussed with eight participants. This process was used to test resonance, identify misinterpretations, and add complexity; it was not treated as participant validation of a single correct analysis. Peer debriefing with disability-studies scholars challenged theoretical overreach. An audit trail recorded major theme revisions and the reasons for retaining, combining, or rejecting interpretations.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Njala University research ethics body and the Sierra Leone Ethics and Scientific Review Committee. Accessible consent information was provided through large print, oral explanation, and sign-language interpretation. Pseudonyms are used and identifying details have been altered because disability and livelihood communities in the study sites are small. A distress and referral procedure was available, and participants received a modest transport allowance consistent with local ethical guidance.

Findings

The four themes below describe patterned meanings across the 30 participants rather than universal experiences of disabled Sierra Leoneans. Differences and tensions are retained because formal employment, informal enterprise, farming, and begging generated distinct

relations to dignity, dependence, and future possibility.

Work as embodied negotiation of space and compressed time.

Participants did not experience the working day as beginning when paid activity started. Work began with preparing the body, arranging assistance, anticipating inaccessible toilets, and negotiating transport. The effort required to become present at work was itself labour. For a wheelchair-using government clerk in Freetown, arrival at his desk marked the completion of one demanding task rather than the beginning of the day:

When I get to my desk, I am already tired. The ramp they constructed is too steep - who designed it? They did not consult any of us. I have to ask the security guard to push me up. Sometimes he is not there, and I wait, maybe 30 minutes, outside my own place of work. Inside, the corridors are narrow. The toilet door is too narrow. I reduce how much I drink so I will not have to use that toilet. By 2 p.m. my back starts hurting from holding. This is before I do any actual work. (Wheelchair-using government clerk, Freetown)

The account shows more than a set of environmental barriers. The steep ramp reorganised dependence, waiting, hydration, pain, and professional belonging. Being unable to enter without assistance, positioned the participant as conditionally admitted to his own workplace. The inaccessible toilet extended institutional design into intimate bodily regulation. For Aminata, a blind market trader, spatial knowledge was produced through repetition and continually disrupted by an unstable streetscape:

I count the steps between the junction and my stall - 43 steps. If there is something in my way - a parked motorbike, a rubbish heap - then I have to begin again. I have fallen three times this year. Every fall means lost trading hours, bruises, and people laughing. (Aminata, blind market trader)

Her route was not simply inaccessible; it was a fragile, memorised achievement. Each obstacle dissolved the reliability of familiar space. The fall carried bodily pain, economic loss, and public exposure at the same moment.

Time was similarly uneven. A deaf roadside worker described leaving at 5 a.m. to reach a workplace four kilometres away by 8 a.m. because minibus drivers often kept on driving when they saw him signing. A phone-charging operator estimated that access delays consumed three to four hours each day. He explained, "The day is short. It is shorter because of the disability." Participants' time was compressed by waiting, detours, slow movement, and recovery. Evening time was often absorbed by exhaustion, reducing family interaction, rest, and preparation for the next day.

Across these accounts, the body was neither a private impairment nor a passive object disabled

by society. It was an active, sensing body whose capacities were continually altered through roads, ramps, rain, transport practices, assistive devices, and pain. We use the term "access work" to describe the unpaid physical and temporal labour required to reach and remain in livelihood activity. Access work was unequally distributed and rarely recognised as part of the job.

Work as recognition, dignity, and a credible worker identity.

Work mattered because it enabled participants to claim a socially intelligible identity as a contributor. Income was important, but participants also contrasted being known by a skill, role, or product with being reduced to impairment. Mariama, who had opened a small tailoring business in Moyamba, expressed this aspiration directly: "I want to be known not as the disabled tailor, but as Mariama who makes beautiful dresses." Her statement did not reject disability identity; it rejected the presumption that disability should be the primary descriptor of her value.

Recognition was unstable even in formal employment. Kadiatu, a woman with albinism working for an NGO, described colleagues' surprise at her competence:

In meetings, I feel the eyes. They are not looking at my face; they are looking at my skin. When I speak, they are surprised I can speak well. "Oh, you are so articulate," they say, as if it is a compliment. It is not. It means they expected less. (Kadiatu, NGO worker)

The apparently positive comment reproduced a diminished prior expectation. Recognition was offered as exceptionality rather than equality. Fatmata, a visually impaired trained teacher, was moved from teaching to filing after parents questioned whether a blind woman could supervise pupils. The reassignment preserved employment while withdrawing the occupational identity for which she had trained. This distinction is important: presence in a workplace did not necessarily constitute inclusion in valued work.

Some participants responded by overperforming competence. Michael, a wheelchair-using data-entry clerk, arrived first, left last, avoided breaks, and accepted additional work because he believed an individual mistake would be generalised to all disabled workers:

If I make one mistake, they will not say, "Michael made a mistake." They will say, "This is why we should not hire disabled people." I carry the weight of all disabled people on my shoulders. (Michael, data-entry clerk).

This burden of representation made worker identity collective and precarious. Formal employment offered status and income, but it also demanded emotional regulation, self-surveillance, and strategic silence. Dignity was therefore not a stable benefit delivered by employment; it was an accomplishment repeatedly negotiated against pity, scrutiny, and low

expectations.

Precarious agency in a moral economy of hustling, subsistence, and begging.

Most participants did not describe work as a linear career. Livelihood was assembled through changing combinations of petty trade, services, farming, family assistance, and occasional begging. Sorie, a phone-charging entrepreneur, explained: "Today phone charging is slow, so I sell sachet water. Tomorrow the water people increase the price, so I go back to charging. You must be like water - flow where the opening is." His flexibility was agentic, but it was also compelled by the absence of stable demand, capital, insurance, and accessible alternatives. Participants occupied an unstable moral boundary between work and begging. Abubakar, an amputee who begged at a Freetown intersection, described public responses ranging from pity to accusation. He was visible as an impaired body but socially anonymous: "They never ask my name." Alimamy, who alternated between vending and begging, explained the decision as a hierarchy of harms: "For me, begging is shame. But hunger is worse than shame. When my child asks for food and I have nothing, what shame matters?"

Begging was neither experienced as free choice nor adequately described as passivity. It was a livelihood strategy adopted under constrained conditions, but it could threaten the worker identity participants sought to maintain. Some traders distanced themselves from people who begged, describing paid exertion as morally superior. These distinctions reproduced stigma within the disability community while allowing participants to defend a fragile identity as hardworking and deserving.

Agency in these accounts was therefore neither absent nor sovereign. Participants improvised, calculated, endured, and sometimes refused, but choices were made within severe material constraints. A single rainy day, confiscated trading goods, stolen phone, episode of illness, or loss of a helper could erase income. The future was often displaced onto children. Abubakar said, "For me, it is finished. But my daughter - if she can go to school, she will not end up like me." Work sustained the present but did not reliably open a future.

Relational worlds of work: interdependence, gender, impairment, and place.

Work was constituted through relationships with family members, neighbours, strangers, customers, DPOs, and religious communities. Assistance could enable livelihood, but it also required emotional and reputational labour. A woman who sold groundnuts explained that she needed someone to carry her basin to the market each morning:

I smile. I greet. I make myself happy. If I become angry, they may not help me the next day. It is a kind of work - the work of being likeable enough to deserve help.
(Groundnut seller, Freetown)

Her account unsettles a simple opposition between dependence and independence. Support made work possible, yet the need to remain agreeable, transferred power to helpers and made mood itself an economic resource. Mohamed, a deaf tailor, described being handled "like a parcel to be delivered" when strangers assisted him, illustrating how care can cross into paternalism.

DPOs were similarly ambivalent. They provided information, solidarity, and access to programmes, but participants also criticised limited capacity, internal conflict, and donor-oriented agendas. Mohamed summarised this tension: "They call meetings. We talk about rights. Then we go home hungry. Rights do not fill the stomach." His statement did not reject rights; it questioned rights discourse when detached from material livelihood.

Gender shaped both opportunity and risk. Women with disabilities were more likely to describe home-based work, restricted mobility, unpaid care responsibilities, and family protection that limited autonomy. Two women disclosed workplace sexual harassment, while others referred to transactional sexual relationships as a survival strategy. These experiences show that economic inclusion cannot be separated from bodily safety and gendered power.

Participants with psychosocial disabilities described episodic work capacity and intense stigma. Ibrahim, a man diagnosed with schizophrenia who collected and sold scrap, said that customers held their bags tighter when he approached and that some DPO spaces also treated people with psychosocial disabilities as difficult. The episodic character of distress conflicted with expectations of continuous reliability; while the label of "madness" could exclude him before any work interaction occurred.

Geography changed the form, rather than simply the degree, of exclusion. In Moyamba, kin networks could provide labour, credit, and belonging, but family authority could also remove access to land. Sahr reported that his family gave his portion of land to his brother because they assumed he could not farm. In Freetown, anonymity sometimes loosened familial scrutiny, yet the city intensified transport barriers, market competition, and social isolation. Interdependence was therefore simultaneously a capability resource and a site of control.

Discussion

The findings support three central arguments. First, work was a struggle for recognition and personhood, not merely a source of income. Second, access to work required additional physical, temporal, emotional, and relational labour that conventional employment measures do not capture. Third, neither the social model nor the capability approach is sufficient alone: the empirical material requires an interactional, decolonial, and relational account situated within informal political economy.

Work, recognition, and the instability of inclusion.

Studies from Ghana and Malawi similarly report that persons with disabilities encounter low expectations, structural discrimination, and policy-practice gaps even when they possess qualifications or occupy middle-class positions (Ocran, 2022; Wanggren et al., 2023). The present study extends this literature by showing how recognition is lived inside employment. Fatmata's transfer from teaching to filing demonstrates that a job can remain formally intact while its valued content is removed. Michael's overwork shows that inclusion may be conditional on exceptional performance. Employment status, therefore, is an inadequate proxy for occupational dignity.

A competing interpretation is that all workers in a low-income, informal economy experience insecurity, long commutes, and weak labour protection. The data cannot isolate a uniquely disability-caused effect because the study did not include a non-disabled comparison group. However, participants described mechanisms that specifically intensified general precarity: drivers not stopping when they saw persons with disabilities signing, inability to use workplace toilets, reassignment based on visual impairment, and the burden of representing all workers with disabilities. Disability did not replace poverty or labour-market insecurity; it reorganised how these conditions were encountered.

Access work, embodied time, and the limits of a barrier-only analysis.

The concept of access work captures the labour hidden before and around paid activity: arranging assistance, navigating routes, waiting for transport, regulating hydration, recovering from pain, managing stigma, and remaining socially agreeable to helpers. These tasks consume time and energy but are rarely included in job design, productivity measures, or social protection assessments. They also reveal why describing a ramp or road as a "barrier" can be analytically thin. The barrier is lived through fatigue, humiliation, dependence, risk, and lost earnings.

The participants' accounts resonate with disability scholarship on non-normative time, including the concept of *crip time*, which challenges the assumption that bodies should conform to standardised schedules and productivity rhythms (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017). Yet in this setting, temporal flexibility was not automatically liberating. Delays were often imposed by inaccessible systems and directly reduced income. The findings therefore distinguish between time adapted around bodily needs and time involuntarily taken by exclusion.

This distinction also clarifies the social model tension identified by the reviewers. Pain, fatigue, and episodic distress were not reducible to social barriers, but neither were they merely private biological facts. A rough road, steep ramp, inaccessible transport system, or rigid work schedule amplified impairment effects. An interactional account preserves the political responsibility to

remove barriers while recognising that some workers will continue to need assistive technology, flexible time, pain management, job redesign, or income support (Shakespeare, 2014; Thomas, 2007).

Relational agency and decolonising the independent worker.

Northern employment policy often imagines an autonomous worker who travels independently, performs a bounded job, and negotiates accommodation with an identifiable employer. Participants' livelihoods were more relational. Family members carried goods, neighbours provided mobility, DPOs connected people to programmes, and customers extended informal credit. Relational support was not external to work; it was part of the infrastructure through which work became possible.

A decolonial analysis does not treat this interdependence as a cultural virtue or evidence that formal rights are irrelevant. Families withheld land, helpers demanded emotional compliance, and DPOs could reproduce exclusion. Rather, following Onazi (2020), the findings suggest that disability justice must evaluate the quality and distribution of relationships and obligations. The relevant question is not whether a worker is dependent, since all work depends on social infrastructure, but whether support is reliable, respectful, reciprocal, and non-coercive.

This relational account also challenges simple narratives of resilience. Sorie's capacity to move between phone charging and water sales was creative, but celebrating adaptability without examining the economic conditions that make constant improvisation necessary would convert structural insecurity into an individual virtue. Agency and constraint were co-present.

Capability deprivation and the moral economy of livelihood.

The capability approach helps explain why employment cannot be evaluated only by whether a person has some income-generating activity. A resource becomes capability through conversion factors (Burchardt, 2004; Mitra, 2006). In the present study, transport, bodily energy, social recognition, safety, assistive technology, and control over time shaped whether work expanded or contracted substantive freedom. A formal job could increase income while reducing health or dignity; informal work could increase autonomy while leaving a person exposed to shocks.

The moral distinctions between trading and begging further show that livelihood has symbolic as well as material value. Naami's (2015) analysis of disability, gender, and employment in Ghana similarly demonstrates that work is embedded in social expectations about productivity and dependence. The Sierra Leonean participants actively negotiated these expectations, sometimes reproducing stigma against other disabled people to protect their own worker identity. This internal differentiation complicates any account of a unified disability

community.

The study's theoretical contribution is therefore not the claim that barriers matter, which is already well established. It is the demonstration that employment inclusion is a conversion process with embodied and relational costs. Access work and recognition determine whether a nominal livelihood becomes a capability-enhancing form of work. This moves analysis from 'Does the person have work?' to 'What must the person expend to make work possible, what forms of personhood does the work permit, and what alternatives are genuinely available?'

Implications for policy and practice

The findings support a layered rather than single-instrument approach. Enforcement of employment non-discrimination and employer tax incentives remains necessary, but formal-sector measures will reach only a minority in an economy dominated by informal work. Disability-inclusive employment policy should therefore include accessible transport and market infrastructure, assistive technology, accessible sanitation, flexible work arrangements, and social protection that does not penalise intermittent or informal earnings.

Interventions should also account for the relational infrastructure of work. Support to cooperatives, DPO-led livelihood networks, accessible childcare, and community-based assistance may be as consequential as employer training. Gender-based violence prevention and safe reporting mechanisms are essential for women with disabilities. People with psychosocial disabilities require anti-stigma measures and employment arrangements responsive to episodic capacity, rather than exclusion based on presumed unpredictability.

These implications should not be read as national prescriptions derived from a representative sample. They are analytically grounded priorities that require testing through participatory policy design, broader labour-force data, and research that includes non-workers and people with intellectual disabilities.

Reflexivity, Limitations, and Transferability

Several limitations bound the claims. First, 30 participants in Freetown and Moyamba cannot represent the national diversity of disabled people, employment sectors, ethnic groups, or districts. The findings concern these participants and may be transferable through contextual comparison, not statistical generalisation. Second, the study recruited people currently engaged in income-generating activity and therefore does not capture those excluded from all livelihood activity or those who do not identify begging as work.

Third, recruitment through DPOs and snowballing may have favoured participants with

stronger organisational or social connections. Direct community outreach reduced but did not remove this bias. Fourth, the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is a major limitation. Fifth, the absence of a non-disabled comparison group means that the analysis cannot empirically separate disability-specific mechanisms from hardships shared by other poor workers.

Sixth, translation and sign-language interpretation involved unavoidable interpretive mediation. Back-translation and clarification can improve fidelity but cannot reproduce an unmediated original meaning. Seventh, the first author's insider-outsider position and relationships with DPOs may have shaped what participants disclosed, especially regarding organisational conflict, begging, sexuality, and harassment. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures a period rather than employment trajectories over time.

The study's strength lies in the combination of extended interviews, mobile observation, maximum variation, reflexive analysis, and detailed contextual description. Transferability should be assessed by readers and stakeholders in relation to other post-conflict, low-resource, and informal-labour settings rather than presumed at a national or regional level.

Conclusion

For the participants in this study, work was simultaneously livelihood, social recognition, bodily expenditure, and a claim to adult personhood. It could enable pride and contribution while demanding substantial access work: the unpaid physical, temporal, emotional, and relational labour required to reach, perform, and retain work in disabling environments. The phenomenological contribution lies in showing how exclusion is lived not only as an external obstacle but as shortened time, regulated bodily need, conditional belonging, compelled likeability, and an uncertain future.

The findings affirm the social model's insistence that environments and institutions disable, but they also show why embodiment, impairment effects, informal political economy, gender, and relationships must remain analytically visible. Employment inclusion should therefore be evaluated by the real freedoms, recognition, safety, and sustainability that work creates, not by job presence alone. These claims are intentionally bounded to two Sierra Leonean settings; broader conclusions require national disability-disaggregated labour data and inclusive research with groups absent from this study.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the 30 participants who shared their experiences and permitted observation of their working lives. We also acknowledge the Sierra Leone Union on Disability Issues, the

Sierra Leone Association of the Blind.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies. Participants received a modest transport allowance in accordance with local ethical guidance.

References

- Ajjawi, R., & Higgs, J. (2007). Using hermeneutic phenomenology to investigate how experienced practitioners learn to communicate clinical reasoning. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(4), 612-638.
- Austin, V. (2023). How does access to assistive technology mediate recourse to disability justice for urban poor people? A study centring the experiences of disabled slum dwellers in Freetown, Sierra Leone [Doctoral dissertation, University College London].
- Berghs, M. (2016). *War and embodied memory: Becoming disabled in Sierra Leone*. London: Routledge.
- Berghs, M., Atkin, K., Graham, H., Hatton, C. & Thomas, C. (2016). Implications for public health research of models and theories of disability: A scoping study and evidence synthesis. *Public Health Research*, 4(8), 1-166.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. UK: SAGE.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37-47.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201-216.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. UK: SAGE.
- Burchardt, T. (2004). Capabilities and disability: The capabilities framework and the social model of disability. *Disability & Society*, 19(7), 735-751.
- Chataika, T. (2012). Disability, development and postcolonialism. In D. Goodley, B. Hughes, & L. J. Davis (Eds.), *Disability and social theory: New developments and directions* (pp. 252-269). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2025). List of issues in relation to the initial report of Sierra Leone (CRPD/C/SLE/Q/1). United Nations.
- Goodley, D. (2013). Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 28(5), 631-644.

- Grech, S. (2015). Decolonising Eurocentric disability studies: Why colonialism matters in the disability and Global South debate. *Social Identities*, 21(1), 6-21.
- Grech, S. & Soldatic, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook*. US: Springer.
- International Labour Organization. (2025). Advancing disability inclusion in the global labour market. ILO.
- Kiaga, A., & Leung, V. (2020). The transition from the informal to the formal economy in Africa. International Labour Organization.
- Kusenbach, M. (2003). Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 455-485.
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D. & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753-1760.
- Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability: Thinking and acting globally. *Disability & Society*, 26(6), 667-682. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602860>
- Mitra, S. (2006). The capability approach and disability. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 16(4), 236-247.
- Morwane, R. E., Dada, S. & Bornman, J. (2021). Barriers to and facilitators of employment of persons with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries: A scoping review. *African Journal of Disability*, 10, Article a833.
- Naami, A. (2015). Disability, gender, and employment relationships in Africa: The case of Ghana. *African Journal of Disability*, 4(1), Article 95.
- Ocran, J. (2022). "There is something like a barrier": Disability stigma, structural discrimination and middle-class persons with disability in Ghana. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), Article 2084893.
- Onazi, O. (2020). *An African path to disability justice: Community, relationships and obligations*. US: Springer.
- Samuels, E. (2017). Six ways of looking at crip time. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37(3). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824>
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, T. (2014). *Disability rights and wrongs revisited* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Statistics Sierra Leone. (2018). Sierra Leone 2015 Population and Housing Census thematic report on disability. Statistics Sierra Leone and UNFPA.
- Thomas, C. (2007). *Sociologies of disability and illness: Contested ideas in disability studies and medical sociology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- United Nations. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. UN.
- Van Manen, M. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

- Vornholt, K., Villotti, P., Muschalla, B. et al. (2018). Disability and employment - overview and highlights. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 27(1), 40-55.
- Wanggren, L., Remnant, J., Huque, S. et al. (2023). Disability policy and practice in Malawian employment and education. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 45(6), 1307-1325.