

# Breaking down Barriers

POLICY  
BRIEF  
17

Employment in supermarkets in Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia

## Barriers affecting persons with disabilities in formal employment

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### Executive summary

Zambia has sound legislation that promotes and supports the formal employment of Persons With Disabilities (PWDs). However, despite the enactment of these sound legislations and affirmative policies, PWDs are still under-represented in formal employment. Similarly, the various challenges affecting PWDs in formal employment in Zambia remain poorly understood. Therefore, using the case of selected supermarkets, this paper sought to examine barriers affecting PWDs in accessing formal employment in supermarkets and understand the challenges they experience at their workplaces. The study found that the challenges affecting PWDs in formal employment in supermarkets revolve around access and functional barriers.

The study identified the following access barriers: the lack of appropriate skills by PWDs to gain employment in supermarkets, the perception by some employers that PWDs are liabilities, failure by the government to operationalize its own policy that promotes employment for PWDs, a lack of awareness by some employers on the government benefits for employing PWDs and a lack of advert information in accessible formats. Functional barriers experienced by PWDs that manage to get a position at a supermarket include the lack of accessible infrastructure, the lack of accessible transport and stigma against PWDs.

## Introduction

About 80 to 90 percent of PWDs of working age are unemployed in developing countries (Southern Africa Federation of Disability Organization, 2015). While in developed countries, 50 to 70 percent of working-age PWDs are unemployed (ILO, 2014). In Zambia, it is estimated that out of the total population of PWDs, less than 5 percent are found working in the formal sector. About 10 percent work in the informal sector and more than 80% work as peasant agricultural farmers (Southern Africa Federation of Disability Organization, 2015)

The government of Zambia has enacted legislation and policies to promote and support the formal employment of PWDs. This commitment is evident through the ratification and domestication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of PWDs (UNCRPD) into the Disability Act number six of 2012 (PDA). However, despite the enactment of these sound legislations and affirmative policies, PWDs remain under-represented in formal employment.

In Zambia, supermarkets employ over 50,000 workers and could be a major source of employment for PWDs. Yet, in practice, this does not seem to be happening. This study seeks to better understand the barriers and challenges affecting persons with disabilities in formal employment. It focuses on supermarkets which are an important source of formal employment in urban areas.

## Methodology

This research was conducted in Lusaka and Copper Belt provinces of Zambia, between April and May 2022. The study focused on three big supermarkets, namely: Shoprite, Choppies and Pick N Pay. Being a qualitative study, the sample in this study was drawn using a purposeful sampling procedure. Therefore, the study involved respondents from key stake-holders, each with their own perspective on, and experience with, our topic of inquiry. Respondents first consisted of managers and PWDs working for the selected three super-markets. Additionally, the interviews targeted representatives of the Zambia Agency for persons with disabilities (ZAPD), which is the government institution mandated to implement PDA of 2012 which includes the employment of PWDs. Besides its formal mandate, some supermarkets like Shoprite and Pick N Pay have used the Agency to identify and recruit PWDs for employment. Finally, representatives of DPOs such as ZAFOD, DRW and CIN have been interviewed because of their understanding of the topic



Godfrey works at the supermarket, here with his colleague. PHOTO: MUNASHE NYAMUTI & THOFAI MTONGA

and because of their advocacy role in promoting employment for PWDs. Besides this, CINO has also been identifying and recruiting employees with a hearing impairment for Choppies supermarkets. In total, 15 respondents were interviewed of which five were human resource managers from the three selected supermarkets, three employees from the selected supermarkets, two PWDs seeking employment in supermarkets, one human resource officer from ZAPD and four directors from the DPOs.

## Findings

Overall, the study found that the three selected supermarkets employed PWDs, although very few and only in specific positions. It also found that the preferred categories of PWDs employed in these supermarkets were those with physical and hearing impairments. The supermarkets indicated that they were employing PWDs through ZAPD and, in the case of one supermarket, through CINO.



Grace, a lady with hearing impairment works at Pick n Pay supermarket. PHOTO: MUNASHE NYAMUTI & THOFAI MTONGA

## Barriers to access formal employment

The study identified several key barriers constraining the ability of PWDs to access formal employment. Supermarkets are generally not motivated to employ PWDs. One of the major impeding factors that respondents attributed to the underrepresentation in formal employment of PWDs in supermarkets is the belief by employers that PWDs cannot function at the level of their able-bodied peers. The thought that PWDs are liabilities was evident in how these supermarkets placed PWDs to carry out specific tasks in the store. For instance, one supermarket indicated that the company was employing persons with hearing impairment in the parcels sections only. This phenomenon is reaffirmed in the choice the three selected supermarkets made by employing only the physically and hearing-impaired persons. From this scenario, it is clear that other categories of PWDs are perceived as not employable by supermarkets.

The other challenge which was attributed to the underemployment of PWDs in supermarkets was the lack of qualifications and appropriate skills by PWDs. It was said that most PWDs lacked the education and appropriate skills to compete for certain positions in supermarkets. This is evident from the findings that most PWDs who were employed in supermarkets were employed as sales floor personnel or in food production.

DPOs pointed out that the underemployment of PWDs in various sectors is also caused by the failure of the Ministry of Community Development and Social Welfare to make PDA of 2012 operational. It was stated that the Act, at least on paper,

has good provisions that support and promote the employment of PWDs in both the public and private sector. For instance, it was stated that section 39 of PDA tries to introduce the quota system in which the government, through ZAPD, is mandated to engage all relevant institutions in both public and private sectors to reserve a prescribed percentage of positions in employment for PWDs. However, the study found that the statutory instruments were not formulated to operationalize this law. Therefore, employers in Zambia, especially in the private sector, do not feel compelled to ensure inclusiveness in their recruitment policies.

In the same vein, the study found that some managers of some supermarkets were not aware of the tax rebate (legal benefits) provided in the Income Tax Act to employers employing PWDs. In other words, the incentives that the government has installed to promote the employment of PWDs are not having their intended effects.

Another factor that was associated with the underemployment of PWDs in formal employment is the absence of information in an accessible format on employment opportunities in the supermarkets. In preparing adverts, supermarkets do not consider different impairments. Often, prospective employees with visual impairments cannot know about the adverts. Sometimes, the adverts are only done in audio sounds hence denying persons with hearing impairments an opportunity to get information on the adverts. Perhaps, this explains why only two categories of disabilities were observed in the

supermarkets: those with physical disabilities and the hearing impaired.

### Functional barriers at workplace

Those few PWDs that managed to get formally employed in the three supermarkets experienced a number of barriers at the workplace that affect their functioning and general well-being.

One major barrier concerns the issue of inaccessible infrastructure. For example, one of the employees with disabilities lamented that the staff toilets in the store were not designed to accommodate wheelchair users. Therefore, he indicated that he was not comfortable using those toilets because it meant that every time he went to the toilet, he needed to leave his wheelchair outside and this had an effect on his dignity as a human being.

Another type of infrastructural barrier relates to mobility

challenges to and from work PWDs face. In Zambia, it is difficult to find accessible public transport that can accommodate a person with a wheelchair on board. Meanwhile, it was stated that supermarkets do not provide transport to their employees. Hence, PWDs especially those with physical impairments have difficulties finding accessible transport to take them to and from work.

Stigma is yet another challenge PWDs faced from their non-disabled colleagues. It was found that most people perceived PWDs, especially the hearing impaired, as difficult and short-tempered individuals. On the other hand, it was also said that hearing-impaired persons would be suspicious of their non-disabled colleagues gossiping about them. This perceived feeling caused most hearing-impaired persons to be socially withdrawn and work in isolation at work.

### Conclusion and recommendations

Employment is an important tool to eradicate poverty among PWDs. However, numerous barriers prevent PWDs from accessing employment at supermarkets, which creates a huge disadvantage to the independent living of PWDs in the country. The study found very few PWDs working at the selected supermarkets. Those few PWDs that managed to be employed in the supermarkets experienced several attitudinal, infrastructural, policy/law and communication barriers.

From the findings, several recommendations emerge.

The Government should:

- Make PDA operational as it is a major piece of legislation that supports the welfare of PWDs.
- Ensure that companies learn about the tax benefits associated with employing PWDs.

DPOs and the Civil Society Organizations should:

- Continue with awareness raising that disability does not equal inability
- Monitor and advocate for the implementation of the PDA in terms of the employment of PWDs.
- Sensitize employers on the benefits of employing PWDs and the importance of accessible adverts and infrastructure.
- Provide skills to PWDs for the employment market and prepare them for employment opportunities.



Grace at the supermarket. PHOTO: MUNASHE NYAMUTI & THOFAI MTONGA

### Editors

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### Notes

Dr. Willem Elbers is the Principal Investigator of 'Breaking Down Barriers' at Radboud University. Dr. Thomas Mtonga is a Blind Zambian disability scholar from the University of Zambia.