Disability, Work, and Aspirations within the Pakistani Context: An Agency-Oriented Capability Perspective

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Pakistan and the mediating role of contextual factors, adopting an agency-oriented Capability Approach within a critical realist paradigm. It examines how capabilities, agency, and structural conditions intersect in shaping lives and opportunities, with particular attention to work as a central pathway to dignity and inclusion. The study demonstrates how structural constraints – embedded in personal, contextual, and institutional dynamics – restrict the translation of aspirations, including employment aspirations, into real freedoms, while also highlighting enabling factors that foster resilience and agency. By deepening understanding of the interplay between aspirations, agency, and structural conditions, the research contributes to the Capability Approach. It provides critical insights for disability policy and practice in the Global South, with specific implications for inclusive employment and human resource practices for persons with disabilities, while underscoring the need to address disabling structures and foster agency and collective empowerment.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Form
CA	Capability Approach
CDS	Critical Disability Studies
CR	Critical Realism
DPOs	Disabled People’s Organisations
GN	Global North
GS	Global South
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
IE	Inclusive Education
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NOWPDP	Network of Organisations Working for People with Disabilities in Pakistan
OPDs	Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
PWDs	Persons with Disabilities
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEN	Special Needs Education
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Framing the Thesis

1.1.1 Research Motivation and Journey

This research journey is rooted not only in academic interest but also in deeply personal experiences. Over the past several years, my husband and I were caring for my mother-in-law, who had been paralysed. This experience brought me into close contact with the barriers faced by those living with physical dependency and their caregivers. During that time, I received a funded PhD offer from a university in Wales. However, my husband felt unable to leave his mother in that condition, and with two young children to care for, I did not feel I had the strength to pursue such a demanding academic path on my own. I declined the opportunity.

Shortly after, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. My father was severely affected and, while he initially recovered from the virus, complications from heavy medication led to multiple organ failure. He remained paralysed for two weeks before he passed away. I found it incredibly difficult to see him in such a state – unable to move or function independently – especially knowing that he had been a strong, capable person throughout his life. Those two weeks were among the hardest we have ever faced. We kept taking him from one hospital to another, and even the process of moving him from home to the hospital was physically and emotionally overwhelming. My mother-in-law also passed away in 2021. These deeply emotional events profoundly shaped my thinking. I began to reflect on the realities of life with disability and dependency in Pakistan. Was this hardship unique to Pakistan, or did others across the world face similar struggles?

Ultimately, I was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue my doctoral studies at Essex Business School in the UK. I embarked on this journey with my family and relocated to the UK at the end of 2021. Coming from a background in management sciences, I was particularly interested in understanding the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the workplace in Pakistan. Questions filled my mind: Do persons with disabilities (PWDs) have access to employment opportunities? Do they work like non-disabled individuals? Why had I never seen anyone with a disability in my school, university, or workplace?

Motivated by these questions, I began my research by reviewing existing literature on employment challenges faced by PWDs. Most of the work I found focused on developed countries. The literature from Pakistan was both limited and mainly focused on medical perspectives, with many studies appearing in journals that do not meet widely accepted academic standards. Moreover, the existing literature did not engage with what persons with disabilities themselves considered meaningful in their work lives. This gap led me to design a study that explored the employment aspirations and challenges of PWDs in Pakistan. I commenced fieldwork in February 2023.

Initially, I struggled to access participants – particularly those who had disabilities and were currently employed. After some frustrating setbacks, I eventually came across an organisation working to support employment for PWDs in Pakistan. Through them, I secured my first two interviews. I had prepared a set of semi-structured interview questions informed by literature and theory. However, during my first interview, I realised just how limited my focus had been. I expected the interview to last one or two hours, but it extended beyond three hours. The participant spoke not just about employment, but about an array of interwoven life challenges: education, social stigma, mobility, family, and more.

The following day, a second interview mirrored this pattern. Once again, the conversation extended far beyond the work and workplace. These experiences marked a turning point. I realised that discussing employment in isolation from broader life experiences would be inadequate and unfair. It would neither reflect the complex realities of my participants nor honour the depth of their perspectives.

That moment changed the direction of my research. I redefined my research questions to explore not only employment-related challenges but also the broader life challenges of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. I became interested in what meaningful change looked like from their standpoint – how they envisioned dignity, inclusion, opportunity, and well-being not only in the workplace but in life more broadly in Pakistan. As my research evolved, it also became more interdisciplinary – drawing not just from management studies, but from sociology, disability and development studies. This interdisciplinary turn aligns with the growing call within the disability and work domain to integrate diverse disciplinary perspectives to understand better and address the complexity of workplace inclusion (Jurado-Caraballo, Quintana-García and Rodríguez-Fernández, 2022). This shift has profoundly shaped the thesis into what it is today: a study that honours the lived realities of PWDs by exploring the aspirations they hold and the contextual factors that shape their capacity to pursue those aspirations.

1.1.2 Broader Research Context

Around 1.6 billion people globally – approximately 15% of the world's population – live with some form of disability (Hanes, Brown and Hansen, 2017). According to the United Nations Development Program (2023), 80% of these individuals reside in developing countries, where social and economic systems often fail to accommodate their needs. Persons with disabilities are described as one of the largest minority groups in the world (Hanes et al., 2017). Yet, they remain among the most marginalised, particularly in the Global South, in terms of access to education, employment, healthcare, and public participation (United Nations, 2019).

Recognising the need for structural change, the global disability rights movement spent decades pushing for a binding international commitment to ensure the full realisation of human rights by persons with disabilities (Degener, 2016). These efforts eventually reflected in the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006. The Convention frames disability not merely as a health or welfare concern but as a human rights issue – one characterised by violation of dignity, denial of autonomy and entrenched structural inequalities.

However, when viewed through the lens of its implications for the Global South, the UNCRPD often fails to account for the stark realities of local contexts. As Grech, Weber and Rule (2023) note, persons with disabilities, particularly in the Global South, are often described as 'the poorest of the poor', facing systemic violations of their rights in ways that are compounded by broader social and political exclusion. Scholars within the field of Critical Disability Studies have raised concerns about the risks of applying Western-derived solutions – such as the universalisation of disability rights frameworks – without accounting for diverse local contexts (Grue, 2019; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). While the UNCRPD aspires to guarantee the full and equal protection of human rights by persons with disabilities, it may unintentionally reinforce binaries between the Global North and South. By overlooking the realities of poverty, structural violence, patriarchy, and the absence of protection of human rights, the Convention fails to account for the factors that deeply shape the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and the social construction of disability in many Southern contexts (Grech et al., 2023). As a result, it risks promoting top-down, context-insensitive 'prescriptions' that may not effectively address local needs (Grech, 2011; Grue, 2019; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). This gap is especially evident in regions like South Asia, where social values, cultural norms, and economic and political conditions are very different from those in the Global North. As a result, international approaches to disability rights may prove insufficient in genuinely empowering persons with disabilities in these settings (Grech, 2011). The lives of PWDs in such settings are consistently marked by exclusion with a persistent cycle of poverty and disempowerment (Grech, 2011; ILO, 2018). Furthermore, the under-representation of PWDs in diverse areas of life poses a serious developmental and social justice challenge in such contexts (Fasciglione, 2015; ILO, 2018).

These challenges have drawn increasing global attention to disability inclusion as a critical area for concern. The urgency of addressing the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities is reflected in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where disability is explicitly recognised as a cross-cutting issue (United Nations, 2015). Several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasise the need for inclusive education, decent work, reduced inequalities, social participation and access to justice for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2019). This global prioritisation highlights that the inclusion of PWDs is not only a matter of human rights but also central to achieving broader development goals.

These global developments have brought disability to the forefront of international policy and development agendas. However, they also underscore the urgent need to move beyond generalised frameworks and explore how disability and related challenges are experienced and understood within specific socio-cultural contexts (Grech, 2011; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). Global commitments can only be effective when translated into context-sensitive approaches that reflect the true lives of persons with disabilities in diverse settings (Grech, 2011). In this regard, there is a growing recognition that understanding the employment and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities – and the barriers and enablers that shape those aspirations – requires deep engagement with local norms, values, and institutional structures (Beatty, Baldridge, Boehm et al., 2019; Grech and Soldatic 2016; Kosanic, Petzold and Martín-López, 2023). This calls for research that foregrounds the voices, needs, and agency of disabled individuals in their own contexts (Kosanic et al., 2023).

It is worth noting that much of the existing research on disability originates from developed countries, particularly from an Anglo-Saxon perspective (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015). In contrast, there is a significant under-representation of studies from developing countries, where the socio-cultural and institutional contexts differ significantly (Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). It is within this broader backdrop that the present study is situated.

1.1.3 Study Context and Research Rationale

While global frameworks and scholarly critiques highlight the importance of contextualised understandings of disability, these concerns take on distinct and pressing dimensions in Pakistan. The country presents a unique intersection of socio-cultural, religious, and institutional factors that shape the lives and aspirations of persons with disabilities.

Pakistan presents a particularly significant case for studying disability and both employment-related and life-related challenges. As a developing country facing many challenges – such as economic hardship, political instability, security concerns, and religious and cultural divisions – it reflects many of the broader problems found in the Global South. These challenges make it harder for the country to respond effectively to the needs of persons with disabilities. Estimates suggest that around 5.03 million people in Pakistan live with some form of disability – more than the entire population of countries like New Zealand (British Council, 2019; Helping Hand, 2012). Despite this, reliable state-level data on disability remains absent. For instance, while the 1998 census recorded 2.34% of the population as disabled (Razzaq and Rathore, 2020), the 2017 census reported a significant decline (Arsh and Darain, 2019). This drop does not reflect a real decline in disability. Instead, it happened because there was no question about disability in the census form at first – it was only added later, after a court order, when a significant portion of the data had already been collected (British Council, 2019). This oversight reflects the broader institutional neglect towards disability and highlights how the absence of accurate data contributes to the social and economic marginalisation of persons with disabilities. As Ali (2024) aptly notes, it is akin to a company CEO designing a budget without knowing how many people are on the payroll.

State-level attention to disability only emerged in response to international developments, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) and the declaration of 1981 as the International Year for Disabled Persons (Gul, 2020). This led to the implementation of the Disabled Persons Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance (1981); however, it has been marked by issues in implementation (Gul, 2020). Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) without any reservations in July 2011 (Gul, 2020). However, despite being a signatory, the country's disability legislation remains far from effective. The primary issue lies in the weak implementation of disability laws by the state's executive bodies. In many cases, state mechanisms show little engagement and accountability. As Gul (2020) notes, the need to enact laws that reflect local realities and discourses is now gaining attention as an important area of research in the Pakistani context.

Cultural perceptions of disability continue to be shaped by institutional discourses that portray it as a form of personal misfortune or affliction, leading to widespread stigma (Dixon, 2023). This, in turn, reinforces a culture of sympathy and pity (Ali, 2024), encouraging charitable rather than rights-based responses to disability (British Council, 2019). In the absence of a comprehensive welfare system, persons with disabilities in Pakistan are primarily dependent on the financial, physical and emotional support of their families, which often leads to a further loss of productivity and independence (British Council, 2019). The lack of accessible infrastructure, institutional preparedness, and appropriate accommodations also limits the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The widespread lack of awareness regarding legal rights, available provisions, and government initiatives means that many persons with disabilities are unable to benefit from the few opportunities that do exist (British Council, 2019).

A World Bank estimate, cited in the British Council (2019), indicates that 71% of persons with disabilities in Pakistan are unemployed. The situation is even more dire for women with disabilities, who face compounded marginalisation due to both gender and disability. The economic cost of this exclusion is also worrying. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2012) projected that Pakistan could face annual financial losses of up to $20 billion if it continues to underutilise the potential of its disabled population (cited in British Council, 2019). Similarly, the British Council’s 2014 report states that around 10% of Pakistan’s population comprises persons with disabilities. Out of these estimated 18 million individuals, only 14% are part of the workforce, while the vast majority remain dependent on their families (British Council, 2014, 2019). Service provision has primarily been taken up by NGOs, mostly in urban areas, reflecting both the limited state capacity and the uneven access to support for rural populations (Ali, 2024).

In light of these challenges – ranging from data gaps and weak policy enforcement to social stigma and the exclusion of disabled voices – it becomes clear that disability in Pakistan remains a marginalised and poorly understood area. The need for context-sensitive, grounded research is therefore urgent – not only to inform more inclusive employment strategies but also to understand what persons with disabilities themselves view as meaningful change in their lives.

1.1.4 Research Questions

This study aims to explore the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan, and to examine how these aspirations are shaped and mediated by personal, social and institutional factors. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions have been developed:

Question 1: *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?*

Question 2: *What personal, contextual, and institutional factors hinder or enable the achievement of work and broader life aspirations among persons with disabilities?*

Question 3: *What strategies do persons with disabilities employ to navigate contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing their work and life goals?*

1.1.5 Theoretical Framework

In mainstream disability discourse and international frameworks, the focus often centres on the provision of resources and the removal of structural barriers to enable the full participation of persons with disabilities in society (a point further developed in the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework chapters). While these efforts are undoubtedly significant, they do not fully capture the complexity of disabled people’s lived experiences – particularly in contexts where multiple layers of social, cultural, and institutional constraints intersect. These frameworks often overlook fundamental questions such as: *What do persons with disabilities value in life?* And *are they truly able to pursue and achieve those valued goals?*

This is where the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Sen, 1985, 1999) offers a more comprehensive analytical framework. It shifts the focus from formal access and participation to the idea of real freedoms. It recognises the choices that persons with disabilities make in shaping a life they consider meaningful, rather than imposing externally defined notions of what is valuable. These central concerns of the Capability approach align closely with the aims of this study. The Capability Approach's emphasis on 'what people value' provided a strong foundation for exploring the employment and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. The concept of conversion factors – the personal, social, and institutional conditions that shape how individuals convert resources into real opportunities – guides the second research question, which investigates both enabling and constraining factors. Additionally, the Capability Approach allows for the exploration of agency, particularly through theoretical integrations discussed in Chapter Three, supporting the third research question, which focuses on how persons with disabilities navigate contextual challenges. For these reasons, the Capability Approach is adopted as the primary theoretical framework for this study. It provides both analytical flexibility and ethical grounding, enabling an inquiry into what persons with disabilities aspire to, what hinders or supports the realisation of those aspirations, and how they exercise agency in the pursuit of a meaningful life.

1.1.6 Methodological Overview

This study views disability as a complex and contextually embedded phenomenon. To meet the aims of the research, it is essential to adopt a philosophical and methodological approach that captures both surface-level experiences and the underlying structures that shape them. Therefore, this study is informed by a critical realist philosophical framework (Bhaskar, 1975; Fletcher, 2017), which recognises a stratified reality consisting of three domains: the empirical (observable experiences), the actual (events that occur whether observed or not), and the real (underlying structures and mechanisms). Critical realism is especially appropriate for studying complex social phenomena, as it acknowledges the influence of material conditions, institutional practices, cultural discourses, emotions, and policies – particularly when these elements have causal power (Fleetwood, 2014). This philosophical lens allows the study to go beyond descriptive accounts and explore how social structures mediate the aspirations and opportunities of persons with disabilities. Given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the limited prior research on PWDs' aspirations in Pakistan (Hammad and Singal, 2015; Muhammad and Siddiqui, 2023), a qualitative research design is adopted (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Data collection was carried out in the four provincial capitals of Pakistan, involving 32 in-depth narrative-style interviews with persons with disabilities, conducted through both in-person and online formats. An additional 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key disability stakeholders working in roles related to disability, including representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), human rights lawyers, educators, employers, and government officials, to gain insights into the broader context. To complement the primary data, relevant grey literature – including policy reports and legislative documents – was consulted to contextualise the research and inform the development of interview guides. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and interpret meanings within the data. This design allowed the study to examine not only what persons with disabilities value and aspire to, but also the contextual, institutional, and cultural barriers and enablers that influence their capacity to realise those aspirations.

1.1.7 Research Significance: Empirical and Theoretical

This thesis contributes to multiple disciplinary and theoretical domains, including disability studies, critical disability studies, diversity and inclusion scholarship in management and organisational studies, as well as development and capability literature. First, this research addresses the scarcity of disability-related empirical research in the Global South, particularly in Pakistan. Existing literature is heavily dominated by Global North perspectives, often neglecting the structural and cultural specificities that shape disability in resource-constrained settings (Grech et al., 2023; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). By foregrounding the voices of persons with disabilities in Pakistan, this study contributes a contextualised and person-centred perspective, adding important nuance to disability discourse in the Global South. Second, the study adds to critical disability studies by uncovering the ways disability is constructed within both organisational and societal discourses (Campbell, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Goodley, 2014; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020). Third, the research contributes to diversity and inclusion literature within management and organisational studies. While prior research has explored workplace barriers for persons with disabilities (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Stone and Colella, 1996; Vornholt, Villotti, Muschalla et al., 2018), these studies often remain limited to workplace-level phenomena and originate primarily from developed, democratic contexts (Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023). In contrast, this research embeds workplace experiences within wider social structures, demonstrating how external social realities are reproduced within contemporary organisations.

The study makes a wider empirical and theoretical contribution to Capability Approach scholarship. First, it identifies and proposes a set of capabilities that persons with disabilities value in a resource-constrained, culturally specific context. Second, it explores the Capability Approach through an institutional lens, highlighting how formal and informal institutions shape the conversion of resources into real freedoms. Third, the study offers a theoretical advancement by empirically illustrating a recursive relationship between agency and structure. In doing so, the study contributes to emancipatory research (Watson, 2019) that emphasises the dynamic interplay between individual freedom and contextual constraint, especially in the lives of marginalised groups.

1.2 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into ten chapters. The first five chapters provide the foundation for the study. The following three chapters present the empirical findings of the study. The last two chapters bring together the empirical findings into dialogue with the broader theoretical frameworks and relevant empirical debates, and outline the study’s key contributions to knowledge.

Chapter One introduces the study by outlining its aims, research rationale, and research questions. It also presents the foundational theoretical orientation and highlights the significance and contribution of the study. Importantly, this chapter begins with a personal account of the researcher’s motivation and journey, providing insight into how the research topic was shaped and evolved by lived experience and the broader socio-cultural realities that inform the study. Chapter Two provides a critical review of the relevant literature, bringing forth key debates and theoretical developments in disability research at both international and national levels, with particular attention to the Global South and the Pakistani context. Chapter Three outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the study. It discusses the limitations of the chosen framework and proposes theoretical integrations that support the development of a contextually grounded conceptual framework to guide the research. Chapter Four presents the research philosophy and methodology. It explains the rationale for adopting a qualitative, critical realist approach and provides a detailed justification for each element of the research design. The chapter also outlines the strategies used to ensure rigour and trustworthiness in the research process. Chapter Five provides the contextual background of the study by summarising the socio-political setting and presenting participant stories that illustrate the empirical realities of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. This chapter also serves as a foundation for the detailed data analysis presented in the following chapters. Chapter Six offers a contextualised analysis of the employment aspirations of persons with disabilities. Chapter Seven explores their educational aspirations. Chapter Eight discusses their aspirations related to community welfare and social change. Together, these chapters address all three of the research questions. Chapter Nine engages in a critical discussion of the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework and broader empirical debates. It synthesises insights across the analytical chapters and revisits the core elements of the study. Chapter

Ten concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings, outlining the contributions to literature and theory, and discussing the limitations of the study. It also offers recommendations for future research and potential policy implications.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of literature relevant to this study, focusing on how disability is conceptualised and how persons with disabilities navigate key life domains such as employment, education, community participation and how these translate into local realities in the context of Pakistan. This literature review has been approached in a bottom-up manner, informed by the emergent themes from the empirical data. As the initial findings broadened the scope of this study, the literature review evolved to engage with a broader range of debates, including international frameworks and lived experiences across diverse domains of life. This reflective approach ensures that the literature reviewed remains closely aligned with the emergent findings in this research. This literature review is divided into two parts. The first part engages with global literature on disability, including key theoretical models, international frameworks and academic debates. The second part discusses the disability context in Pakistan, outlining the specific conditions in which disability is experienced. Before these two parts, the review begins with a brief conceptual discussion on disability terminology, specifically the debate between the terms *disabled people* and *persons with disabilities*, as this underpins the language used throughout the thesis.

2.2 Terminology Debate in Disability

A crucial aspect of disability research involves engaging with the ongoing debates surrounding disability terminology. How disability and disabled people are defined and described within society directly influences how persons with disabilities are perceived and treated. A clear divide exists between the terms commonly used in the UK versus those used in the USA and Australia to describe the relationship between impairment and society (Harpur, 2012). In the UK, scholars influenced by the social model of disability often use the term *disabled people*, which is also associated with the disabled people's civil rights movement (Shakespeare and Watson, 2021). However, this term has been criticised for "*defining the person by their attribute rather than their humanity*" (Harpur, 2012, p. 327) and for reinforcing an ‘ableist ideology’ that reinforces a binary view of society as either able or disabled (Harpur, 2012). In contrast, advocates of the term *persons with disabilities* argue that people should not be defined by their disabilities; instead, disability should be positioned behind the individual (Harpur, 2012). Critics of this label, however, contend that it reflects a medicalised view of disability and fails to acknowledge the role of society in transforming impairment into disablement (Clark and Marsh, 2002). Despite the ongoing debate, the term *“persons with disabilities”* has gained widespread international acceptance, particularly following its adoption by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), making it a prominent global nomenclature (Harpur, 2012).

While this research acknowledges and supports the contributions of the social model of disability in advocating for the rights of disabled people, it argues that the term *disabled people*, as constructed by this model, may inadvertently reinforce ableist bias. As Clark and Marsh (2002) highlight, language shapes perception, and thus, it is essential to choose terms carefully and consciously. For these reasons – and in recognition of its inclusive and internationally accepted usage – this thesis adopts the term *persons with disabilities (PWDs)* throughout.

Having clarified the terminology adopted in this thesis, the following sections engage with the broader body of literature on disability, beginning with global theoretical models and academic debates.

2.3 Global Perspectives on Disability

This section outlines key global discussions on disability, focusing on how the literature conceptualises disability and highlights the lived experiences of PWDs across various life domains.

2.3.1 Defining and Conceptualising Disability

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) defines PWDs as individuals "*who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*" (United Nations, 2006, Article 1). The proposed definition by the United Nations unfolds two fundamental ideas: effective participation in society and the necessary condition that such participation occurs on an equal basis with others. This definition also signifies the foundational importance of inclusion and equality as a matter of justice for everyone. This review begins by exploring what it means to participate in society and how the notion of 'participation' has historically informed the conceptual understanding of disability. It then turns to the matter of equality, examining what it means to be 'equal with others' and how this idea has been conceived from a disability perspective.

Wolf (2009, p. 2) contends that a good society should be able to provide its citizens with genuine opportunities for ‘secure functionings’, or more broadly, for meaningful participation in social life. This raises the question: what determines the ‘genuine opportunities’ in life that enable an individual to participate effectively? Wolf (2009) explains that three factors shape a person’s opportunities in life. The first factor is an individual’s internal resources, which John Rawls (1971) refers to as ‘natural assets’, such as physical makeup and cognitive abilities. The second factor is external resources, which may include money, property, or other material possessions. The third determinant is the social and material structure of society, which determines the rules of the game for living within that society. These three factors collectively determine the life opportunities available to an individual. A disadvantage may arise for any individual when there is a lack or limitation in one or more of these factors – whether internal resources, external resources, or the surrounding social and material structure (Wolf, 2009). This understanding is particularly relevant in the context of disability, where such limitations often intersect and compound to restrict access to meaningful participation in society. This relationship between limited resources and restricted opportunities explains why the term *disability* has frequently been associated with *disadvantage*, either inherently or due to its effects (Wolf, 2009). PWDs experience disadvantage because deficits in their natural assets (such as an impaired body or mind), combined with limitations in external resources, restrict their access to life opportunities within a given social context. This has led to the conceptualisation of disability and the development of various approaches aimed at mitigating its effects across the three domains discussed above. The following sections unpack each of these three domains in greater detail – internal resources, external resources, and the social and material structure – to explore how they shape life opportunities, particularly for persons with disabilities, and how they have contributed to the diverse historical development of disability understandings.

The first perspective conceptualises disability as a deficit in the body, suggesting that PWDs are deficient in their natural resources. This conceptualisation forms the basis of the individual model of disability, more commonly known as the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Within this perspective, the proposed remedy lies in personal enhancements (Wolf, 2009) through medical interventions aimed at reducing the natural deficit. The second perspective suggests that PWDs' external resources should be levelled up to provide them with a better footing to overcome the absence of their natural resources. This *resource enhancement* perspective aligns with the central concern of some resource-based approaches, such as Rawls' (1971) emphasis on redressing disadvantage through the redistribution of resources. This resource-oriented perspective has also been a feature of many welfare approaches underpinning the *charity model of disability*. The third perspective focuses on enhancing the social context without altering the internal or external resources of PWDs. This can be summed up as: "*change the rules of the game so that people can do better with the resources they already have*" (Wolf, 2009, p. 16). This perspective – of PWDs' status enhancement (Wolf, 2009) – considers the social context as deficient in providing opportunities. This conceptualisation forms the foundation of the well-known *social model of disability* (Oliver, 1990). The remedies under this regime include legal reforms, shifts in social attitudes, or institutional changes

– encompassing diverse approaches such as the *human rights model* (Degener, 2017), *cultural model* (Davis, 1995; Siebers, 2008), and *critical disability studies* (Goodley, 2014), which have brought greater nuance to the initial framework of the *social model of disability*.

While each of these perspectives provides valuable insight into understanding the experience of disability, they tend to operate in isolation and offer a singular explanation of disability rooted either in the deficiency of an individual's natural assets, their external resources, or in their society's makeup (Wolf, 2009). Within the process of this literature analysis, it emerges that the lived experiences of PWDs rarely unfold within the neat bounds of any single domain. Instead, these dimensions interact and overlap in complex and often unpredictable ways. Therefore, a more holistic understanding of disability must encompass all these domains to avoid the risk of oversimplifying the disability experience.

Moving towards the matter of equality, it becomes essential to understand what is meant by *inequality* to grasp the true gist of *equality*. As emphasised by Woods, Benschop and van den Brink (2022, p. 94): "*Inequality and equality are two distinct concepts, but they are* interrelated. *The conceptual clarification of inequality provides the basis from which to explore its solutions*." Inequality is a multifaceted concept that spans across various domains of life. Therborn (2015) offers a threefold framework – vital, existential, and resource inequality – to highlight the very nature of inequality experienced by human beings. Vital inequality is reflected in health disparities. This dimension underscores the health–related disadvantage experienced by people. The existential dimension of inequality concerns how individuals are treated in relation to others. Existential inequality arises when people are denied dignity, respect, and recognition. For

PWDs, this often results in forms of stigma, marginalisation, or being treated as inferior beings. The unequal distribution of resources, termed *resource inequality*, forms the third dimension of inequality. For PWDs, this is reflected in their unequal access to income, education, employment, or other social means that enable their full participation in society.

The discussion unfolds various angles through which to understand how PWDs experience inequality in their full and effective participation in society. Building on the foundational understanding of participation and equality under the UNCRPD – and its alignment with historical conceptualisations of disability from these perspectives – it is vital to move the discussion from definition toward the theoretical framing of disability in the literature.

2.3.2 Framing Disability: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives

A deeper understanding of disability requires examining the theoretical and ideological frameworks that shape how disability is presented, structured, and interpreted over time in academic discourse and practical interventions. These frameworks help clarify dominant understandings of disability and explain the root causes of inequality (Retief and Letšosa, 2018). What follows is a discussion of the dominant frameworks of disability through an evolutionary lens, tracing how each framework has developed in critique of others over time and how each contributes uniquely to our understanding of disability.

2.3.2.1 Individual Model of Disability (Medical Model of Disability)

Historically, an ‘individual discourse’ on disability remains a prominent perspective (Hanes et al., 2017) in which impairment is considered the root cause of limitations in performing routine tasks and socially valued roles (Parsons, 1951). Within the individual paradigm, disability happens due to an individual’s biological deficits; thus, social inequality is seen as a direct consequence of this personal misfortune (Priestley, 2005). Disability is explained in terms of ‘ascribed social deviance’ (Barnes, 2014) and seen as a burden on society, leading to an emphasis on curing the impairment to help the individual adjust to the ‘normal’ social roles (Fasciglione, 2015; Oliver, 1990).

Within this paradigm, two prominent strands of literature can be identified. The first is a biomedical strand, which focuses on the body’s physical or cognitive abilities. Impairment is seen as an intrinsic abnormality that requires a cure (Shakespeare and Watson, 1997). The second strand of literature draws on psychological explanations of disability, examining the individual’s adjustment to stigma or damaged identity (Goffman, 1963). Both strands of literature within individual models of disability emphasise the individual’s responsibility to make personal adjustments, either with the help of medical practitioners or with the support of psychologists, to fit into a ‘normal’ social environment. Inequality is reduced to an individual’s biological or psychological characteristics (Priestley, 2005). The crux of the individual model, as a view of disability rooted in individual pathology, is captured by Oliver (1996, p. 31), who argues that “*the individual model for me encompassed a whole range of issues and was underpinned by what I called the personal tragedy theory of disability. But it also included psychological and medical aspects of disability {….}. In short, for me, there is no such thing as the medical model of disability; there is, instead, an individual model of dis-ability {….}.”*

While the proposed remedies under this framework, in the form of medical interventions such as surgeries, assistive technologies and psychological treatments, hold enormous benefits for improving the health conditions of people (Shakespeare, 2013), this model remains limited in scope and has been widely criticised. The Individual model has been condemned for creating a binary divide between normality and abnormality, with PWDs being portrayed as deviating from normality (Barnes, 1991). The overemphasis on health deficit, under this paradigm, has led to the transfer of power to health professionals, resulting in a paternalistic system that undermines the agency, autonomy and development prospects of PWDs (Mutanga, 2015). Critics argue that this individual model of disability overlooks the critical life dimensions – such as social, economic, historical, and political – of PWDs lived realities (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1996; Shakespeare and Watson, 2021). Furthermore, within this framework, the individual is reduced to their impairment, and their agency is rendered invisible (Watson, 2019). In response to these limitations, a socially dominated understanding of disability emerged as an alternative, powerful discourse (Barnes, 2014; Oliver, 1990).

2.3.2.2 Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability reconceptualises the challenges associated with disability as stemming from society’s limitations rather than an individual’s deficit (Oliver, 1990, 2013). This paradigm supports the understanding that the disablement experiences of individuals with impairments are rooted in social barriers and society’s inability to accommodate their needs (Williams and Mavin, 2012). The historic shift from individual to the social enabled both scholars and activists to critique the ways through which societies and social processes create disabling experiences for impaired individuals (Priestley, 2005). The collective efforts of academic scholars like Mike Oliver and Colin Barnes and disabled activists such as Vic Finkelstein and Paul Hunt helped raise the voices of the disabled and challenged the individual discourse of disability through the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) during 1970s. This new understanding of disability helped in untying the experiences of impairment from disability. This has been manifested in the ideas of UPIAS (1976, p. 3): "*Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society*". This is also evident in Finkelstein's (1980) writings: "*Disability is the outcome of an oppressive relationship between people with impairments and the rest of society*" (p. 47). Application of the classic social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) has evolved along two prominent theoretical strands serving as a critique of its naïve social understanding: the cultural model and the structural model. The cultural model focuses on the societal and linguistic construction of disability and how this representation creates social inequality. Within this perspective, scholars (for example, Davis, 1995; Shakespeare, 1994; Siebers, 2008) emphasise the influence of culture and ideas in shaping disability labels. It further lays the foundation of critical disability studies (Goodley, 2011, 2014, 2017; Meekosha, 2011; Titchkosky, 2011). These studies have enriched disability scholarship by broadening the explanation of disability through cultural, discursive and sexual dimensions. This research strand has helped understand the labelling of particular groups as 'others' (Goodley, 2017). It advocates that the degree to which people experience social inequalities varies according to dominant cultural perceptions of difference (Young, 1990). Fraser (1987, cited in Priestley, 2005) contends that dominant cultural narratives are shaped by the values of powerful social groups – 'cultural imperialism' in Iris Young's (1990) terminology – which further decides the needs of subordinate groups. The development of the notion of ‘ableism’ by Campbell (2009, 2013) is a further sophisticated addition in critical disability literature which shifts the focus from disablism (the other or oppressed) towards the ableism (dominant). Campbell (2009) contends that ableism extends beyond mere discrimination against PWDs; rather, it constitutes an inescapable structural system of thought that privileges norms of ‘abledness’ by systematically marginalising those who diverge from these norms. The notion of ‘intersectionality’ by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991) is a great contribution to understanding the system of oppression in social structures. Intersectionality provides a great nuance to the traditional understanding of inequality by explaining how systems of oppression – such as race, gender, disability, and class – are mutually overlapping, interconnected and reinforcing (Homan, Brown and King, 2021). Key contribution of intersectionality lies in its critique of combining different dimensions of inequalities as monolithic (Homan et al., 2021). However, in much of the disability literature, intersectionality remains persistently underapplied (Naples, Mauldin and Dillaway, 2019; Wickenden, 2023). Disability is too often treated as a singular, isolated identity, with little attention to the nuanced interplay between it and other facets of a person’s identity. Prevailing approaches are essentially “additive”, overlooking how disability and other identities co-construct experiences in complex and shifting ways (Wickenden, 2023).

The literature strand – within social constructionist and cultural model – has been helpful in recognising PWDs as cultural minorities, oppressed and outsider groups. While this research strand is valuable in explaining how differences are socially labelled, it often remains limited in its explanatory power to explore reasons behind the social construction of some groups as ‘dominant’ and consequently others as ‘oppressed’ (Priestley, 2005).

The second prominent theoretical strand within the social model is the ‘structural model’ with its root in material barriers and power relations. This theoretical strand shifts the focus towards institutional discrimination and systemic oppression of PWDs within modern societies, highlighting how such systemic discrimination generates social inequality. This school of thought identifies relations of power and material barriers as hindrances to equality for PWDs. These studies draw on the Marxist and materialist analysis to identify the exclusion of PWDs (Priestley, 2005). These studies explain that capitalism generates new power relations that systematically exclude many PWDs from equal participation in society (Finkelstein,1980), particularly from paid labour (Oliver, 1990). These studies argue that while medical approaches classified PWDs based on their biological impairments, welfare systems and industrial capitalism constructed a broader category of PWDs as excluded from the labour force (Finkelstein, 1991). This exclusion, in turn, institutionalised the development of new welfare systems to manage the ‘care’ needs of these excluded people (Priestley, 2005). However, while this strand highlights the institutionalisation of exclusion, it raises crucial questions about the role of welfare in either perpetuating dependency or providing essential support. There is a tension between critiquing welfare as a mechanism of social control and recognising its potential as a vital safety net for many PWDs. This strand of literature may at times overlook the lived importance of welfare provisions for survival and dignity, particularly in contexts where other forms of support are absent.

Diverse approaches within the social model of disability draw attention to the fact that disability is produced by social arrangements – rooted in values, cultures, physical structures, and the political economy – rather than resulting from individual impairment or personal misfortune. A valuable strength of the social model of disability lies in its capacity to reframe disability as a matter of social discrimination and injustice. Despite these valuable insights, this approach is not without criticism. While the social model rightly points out the weakness of viewing disability solely through a medical lens, it remains constrained by its own tendency to view disability solely through a social lens (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). The social model has been criticised for overemphasising the social issues of disability (Terzi, 2004) while completely overlooking the embodied experiences of impairment (Haegele and Hodge, 2016). Thomas (1999) describes this limitation as 'impairment effects', which refer to the limiting aspects of living with an impairment that result directly from the impairment itself rather than from socially constructed barriers. The social model has been widely criticised for ‘collectivising’ the needs of people with different impairments and identities into a common interest group (Priestley, 2005). While this supports the formation of shared disability identity, it tends to neglect the intersectional experiences within that identity as critiqued by various scholars (Ferri and Gregg, 1998; Goldberg, 2016; Priestley, 2005) with some exceptions found in critical disability discourse (Campbell, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Goodley, 2014; Grover and Soldatic, 2013; Meekosha, 2011). It has been further pointed out that this identity politics based on a commonality approach (Priestley, 2005) tends to privilege certain well-represented impairment groups, such as wheelchair users, while further marginalising those with less visible or less socially recognised impairments (Goodley and Moore, 2000). The social approaches have further been questioned for the portrayal of PWDs as the victims of society (Terzi, 2004, 2005a), which led to undermining their autonomy and ability to act independently (Watson, 2019). It has been subjected to a major critique for privileging social structures at the cost of individual agency (Thomas and Corker, 2002; Shakespeare and Watson, 1997, 2021; Watson, 2019).

Literature highlights that a persistent limitation within disability studies is the tendency to fall between a binary lens (individual–social) to conceptualise disability (Grue, 2019), which oversimplifies the experiences of disability. These limitations have led to the emergence of more multidimensional accounts of disability.

2.3.2.3 International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)

In response to the limitations of both the individual and social models of disability, the need emerged for a more interactive and integrated framework to understand disability. Reflecting this shift, Shakespeare (2013, p. 26) conceptualises disability as a phenomenon arising from "*a complex interaction of biological, psychological, cultural and socio–political factors, which cannot be extricated except with imprecision*." Building on this development, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) proposed a socio–medical approach (Mutanga, 2015) or 'biopsychosocial model' (Bhaskar, Danermark and Price, 2018) to understand disability. ICF conceptualises human functioning through three dimensions: the bodily dimension, which includes biological functions like vision or the absence of limbs; the personal dimension, which pertains to the performance of activities and actions such as reasoning, communicating, or moving; and the social dimension, which relates to involvement in social life such as education and work (Bickenbach, 2021). Bickenbach (2021) defines disability in ICF as the result of combining two categories of factors, i.e. intrinsic health and external environment. While this framework is helpful for recognising terms and classifications associated with disability in assisting health professionals and policymakers to develop intervention strategies (Saleeby, 2007), it is not without shortcomings. Mitra (2014) critiques the ICF classification for presenting a pre-defined list of complex body attributes, thereby limiting its capacity to capture the dynamic and context-specific understanding of disability. Moreover, it has been noted that ICF classification continues to reflect a vision of human activity that is predominantly shaped by a biomedical perspective, positioning biological factors as the primary determinants of disability (Mutanga, 2015). Bickenbach (2014) points out that ICF falls short in fully capturing aspects of individual choice and agency in the lives of PWDs. This concern is further echoed by Mutanga (2015), who reinforces that ICF fails to account for the aspirations and goals of PWDs, as well as their access to resources, which are all integral to understanding and analysing lived experiences of PWDs. These limitations illuminate the need for a more comprehensive framework that draws attention to individual freedoms, aspirations, and access to resources, while also acknowledging the interplay between impairment and the social barriers it produces.

2.3.2.4 Capability Approach and Disability

Most of the disability literature, guided by the above-discussed models, frames disability as a powerless and marginalised phenomenon, either as a victim of society or as a victim of impairment (Watson, 2019). The capability approach (CA) primarily shifts the focus from deficits to freedoms, emphasising what individuals are genuinely able to do and be (Sen, 1999, p. 87). This way, CA underscores the power of human agency to enable individuals to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (Garcés, 2020). Impairment – in the capability framework – is envisioned as a form of personal diversity (Broderick, 2018) which may affect a person's ability to achieve ‘functionings’, but not the sole or defining element of their lived experience. The Capability Approach captures the dynamic interaction between personal, social and environmental factors, particularly at the intersection of available resources and agency. This is why Bickenbach (2014) proposes reconciling the ICF with the capability approach to address the ICF’s limitation to incorporate the agency of PWDs. Disability, within the CA, is understood not only as a deprivation of functionings or capabilities resulting from internal or external factors (Mitra, 2006), but also as a condition that draws attention to the role of human agency (Alkire, 2008; Bazzani, 2023). This way, it renders the debate over social versus natural causes of disability less relevant while placing the whole emphasis on what a person is able to be and do in life (Broderick, 2018; Terzi, 2005b), with their internal and external life conditions. Thus, the CA moves beyond deficit-based models to promote genuine human flourishing. The capability approach not only aligns with the social model of disability by recognising the external barriers (Terzi, 2004) but also acknowledges the lived experience of impairment (Burchardt, 2004), which is recognised within the medical model. In this way, the Capability Approach offers a powerful solution to the longstanding tension between the individual and social models of disability by conceptualising disability as an interaction between impairment and social context (Norwich, 2014). At the same time, it serves as a promising framework for advancing social justice (Frahsa, Abel, Gelius et al., 2021). The contextually sensitive nature of this approach (Broderick, 2018) considers an individual's conception of well-being and a good life in relation to their personal, social, cultural, and political circumstances (Dubois and Trani, 2009). The capability approach offers an evaluative framework (Bellanca, Biggeri and Marchetta, 2011) for explaining and assessing individual well-being, particularly in contexts of inequality and social exclusion (Gupta, De Witte and Meershoek, 2021; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Riddle, 2022; Sen, 2000; Trani, Bakhshi, Bellanca et al., 2011). Terzi (2005b, p. 207) contends that CA favours "*active participation of disabled people and disabled people's movements in the process of identifying relevant capabilities"* and how social policies should be designed to support these capabilities. Similarly, the capability approach's focus on human freedom, dignity and development firmly grounds it within broader human rights and social justice discourses (Trani et al., 2011). Therefore, this approach has emerged as an inclusive, multidimensional and promising framework for a holistic understanding of the lived realities of PWDs. Literature highlights that the capability approach brings together key tenets from various prominent disability models, offering a more integrative and comprehensive framework for understanding the lived experiences of PWDs (Burchardt, 2004; Kim and Adu-Ampong, 2024; Frahsa et al., 2021; Mitra, 2006, 2018; Trani et al., 2011).

Within the disability studies, the capability approach has been employed in three broad categories: Normative, conceptual and exploratory. Philosophers have widely used the Capabilities Approach to identify key dimensions of human well-being (Alkire, 2002; Deneulin and Davies, 2018; Nussbaum, 2000, 2006, 2011; Robeyns, 2005, 2006). Within disability domain, it has been employed to develop normative theories of justice where capabilities are seen as social and policy goals. For instance, Nussbaum (2000) proposed a list of central capabilities grounded in human dignity, which she argues should apply universally – including to PWDs. Similarly, Vizard and Burchardt (2007) identified ten capability domains as human rights dimensions to support a justice-based framework. This normative application has also been extended to examine disability-related issues empirically (Berghs, Atkin, Graham et al., 2016), including the assessment of multidimensional poverty (e.g., Mitra, Posarac and Vick, 2013, Mitra, Palmer, Kim et al., 2017) and the evaluation of disability policies through a capability-informed lens (e.g., Ruiz, Durán and Palá, 2019).

A second way the Capability Approach has been applied in disability research is through its conceptual use to clarify and frame the relevance of CA to disability-related issues. This theoretical strand helps reframe disability as capability deprivation and informs how justice and inclusion are understood. Prominent conceptual contributions in this dimension include the works of Bhogal-Nair, Lindridge, Tadajewski et al. (2024), Broderick (2018), Burchardt (2004), Bellanca et al. (2011), Mitra (2006, 2014, 2018), Norwich (2014), Taylor (2012), Reindal (2009), and Riddle (2020). Building on this conceptual foundation, several empirical studies have used the CA to focus on the opportunity aspect – particularly social arrangements – to assess the well-being of persons with disabilities. These studies raise critical questions about inequality and human rights, critique development policies, and advocate for social justice (e.g., Bakhshi and Trani, 2019; Bajmócy, Mihók and Gébert, 2022; Biggeri, Bellanca, Bonfanti et al., 2011; Ryan and O'Brien, 2024; Ruiz et al., 2019; Trani, Bakhshi, Brown et al., 2018; Vecchio and Martens, 2021).

A third application of the Capability Approach is its explanatory role in uncovering the mechanisms underlying specific social phenomena. There have been growing calls within CA scholarship to use it as an explanatory theory (Robeyns, 2017; Zimmermann, 2006). Within disability research, however, this potential has only been partially realised, with a limited number of studies engaging with CA in this way, including Mutanga (2015), Ton, Gaillard, Adamson et al. (2019, 2020, 2021, 2021a), Parey (2020), and Iliya and Ononiwu (2021). This indicates that the explanatory potential of the Capability Approach remains underutilised in disability studies. Berghs et al. (2016) highlight this significant underutilisation of the Capability Approach's empirical explanatory potential, particularly in exposing structural discrimination, social inequalities, oppression, and resistance experienced by persons with disabilities. This gap also reflects a discontinuity between the Capability Approach and critical disability studies, as noted by Berghs et al. (2016). Bridging this divide may enhance the CA's alignment with critical disability perspectives and strengthen its relevance for transformative social analysis – an area that remains a prominent gap in CA-based disability studies to date.

2.4 Disability in Practice: Experiences in Work, Education and Community Participation

While the previous section focused on how disability is conceptualised and framed within various theoretical strands, it is equally important to examine how these understandings translate into the everyday life experiences of PWDs. The following section leads to the diverse and often unequal ways in which disability is lived and navigated across different domains of life – employment, education and community participation – by examining the social norms and structural conditions that shape these experiences in these domains of life.

2.4.1 Persons with Disabilities and the Work Domain

Work is said to be an important feature of human life, and engaging in meaningful work is mandatory for health, socialisation, communication and overall well-being of human beings (Wehman, 2011). Humans are often defined by what they do for a living. Literature suggests that engaging in work is a way of reducing financial adversities, seclusion and low self-esteem among PWDs (Purc-Stephenson, Jones and Ferguson, 2017). Since paid work plays a crucial role in helping PWDs overcome experiences of disability and social isolation (Purc-Stephenson et al., 2017), it is essential to recognise PWDs as equal and rightful participants in the labour market, entitled to the same employment rights and opportunities as others (Wehman, 2011). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) envisions work opportunities for all individuals to be grounded in the principles of "*decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity*" (ILO, 1999, p. 3). However, this vision remains far from reality for many PWDs (ILO, 2018), particularly in developing contexts where systemic barriers persist (Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023; Shaw, Wickenden, Thompson et al., 2022). In practice, demographically diverse groups, including PWDs, are often concentrated in part-time or temporary roles on fixed-term or contractual bases – forms of non-standard employment that differ from the full-time, permanent, and direct work arrangements defined by the ILO as standard (ILO, 2012). While such non-standard forms of work have expanded access to employment for previously underrepresented groups, Greene and Kirton (2010) caution that they have also entrenched new forms of employment inequality, limiting prospects for job security, progression, and equal treatment in the workplace. Greene (2015) further argues that non-standard workers face multiple disadvantages, including reduced job security, poorer working conditions, and limited access to trade union representation.

2.4.1.1 Disability, Work and Exclusionary Mechanism

Despite work opportunities for PWDs being recognised as a fundamental human right (Fasciglione, 2015), their participation in employment remains severely inadequate, as highlighted by the ILO (2018). To understand why it persists, it is essential to know that the individual or medical framework of disability continues to dominate in explaining PWDs' organisational experiences. Organisations often operate according to 'variations on the theme of ableness' (Williams and Movin, 2012, p. 165), whether through standardised work designs or expectations grounded in non-disabled individuals' abilities (Santuzzi and Waltz, 2016). This orientation has also contributed to the emergence of a stereotype discourse of 'ableism' which devalues the abilities of disabled people in comparison to those so-called able-bodied people (Jammaers, 2023; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020; Schloemer-Jarvis, Bader and Böhm, 2022). Van Aswegen and Shevlin (2019) argue that ableism tends to penetrate society through the discourses of power and results in unequal power relations between able-bodied and PWDs. As a discursive construct of disability, ableism (Campbell, 2009) within the employment context questions the potential of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and consistently portrays them as less productive and incapable of meeting organisational demands and the neoliberal agenda (Elraz, 2018; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020).

Organisations are complex, dynamic and power-laden structures (Woods et al., 2022). Thus, understanding PWDs, as workers within organisations, raises the need to examine how organisations create inequality for specific social groups, particularly for PWDs. Acker (2006) argues that inequality in organisations results from day-to-day activities being arranged in a way that reproduces privilege and power for some and disadvantage for others. Acker's (2006) 'inequality regimes' is a powerful concept for understanding how organisations set the rules of the game for negotiation among diverse social groups, thereby mirroring the norms of the broader social context. As powerfully noted by Acker; *these regimes are linked to inequality in the surrounding society, its politics, history, and culture*" (2006, p. 443). Inequality regimes further pave the way for the construction of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 2006) suited to the neo-liberal market agenda. The notion of the "ideal worker" exposes how workplace structures are implicitly gendered and exclusionary, often in ways that affect PWDs and other marginalized groups. These lenses provide a useful guidance to highlight the position of PWDs in organisations, showing how the norms of inequality regimes (Acker, 2006), ideal worker (Acker, 2006) and ableism (Campbell, 2009) create disabling conditions and reinforces inequality for disabled and other minority identities (Crenshaw, 1989) to maintain the status quo (Woods et al., 2022).

While the above-discussed concepts help to explain the underlying logics of workplace exclusion, it is equally important to consider how these dynamics translate into the lived experiences of PWDs. The following review focuses on the workplace experiences of PWDs that have been widely documented in empirical studies.

2.4.1.2 Ground Realities of Work for Persons with Disabilities

This section examines the ground realities of work for PWDs as documented in the literature, focusing on both the obstacles they face, and the strategies proposed to promote their inclusion.

2.4.1.2.1 Barriers to Employment

The everyday experiences of PWDs in the labour market reveal a range of persistent and interrelated barriers that limit their inclusion and well-being (Schur, Han, Kim et al., 2017). Earlier research has primarily sought to describe and explain the disability employment gap by highlighting the discrimination and barriers faced by PWDs – whether in gaining entry to the labour market (Østerud, 2023) or within workplace settings (Jammaers, 2023). Drawing on existing literature, this section summarises the key challenges faced by PWDs in entering the labour market, examines issues encountered in the workplace, discusses interventions aimed at improving their inclusion, and identifies gaps in the empirical literature. Literature highlights that PWDs face discrimination when entering the job market due to employer biases rooted in the ideal and able-bodied worker norm (Østerud, 2023). While these discriminatory ideals often hinder PWDs from entering the labour market, those who do gain employment continue to face a range of challenges (Vornholt et al., 2018). Earlier research suggests that most workplaces are designed with non-disabled individuals in mind, which results in exclusion of the needs of PWDs (Köseoglu, Hon, Kalargyrou et al., 2021; Schur et al., 2017). Commonly discussed barriers include inaccessible doorways, staircases, restrooms, out-of-reach canteens and a lack of assistive technologies and accessible parking (Kim, Kim and Kim, 2020).

Research also indicates that most employers fail to understand reasonable adjustments (Köseoglu et al., 2021) or frame them around a bare minimum adjustment (Molyneux, 2021). Intensified work demands, such as extended hours and heavy workloads, often undermine work-life balance and serve as significant barriers to sustained employment (Vornholt et al., 2018). Flexibility options are frequently perceived as incompatible with the norms of productive organisations, which tend to value availability, presenteeism and standardised work schedules (Williams and Movin, 2012). As labour markets become increasingly competitive, many PWDs struggle to keep pace with the mounting demands of workplaces (Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022). Furthermore, the inaccessibility of public transport – a common phenomenon in most parts of the world – continues to pose a significant barrier to the sustained employment of PWDs (Tessier, Clément, Gélinas et al., 2024). Moreover, employers seldom offer transport-related support to accommodate the needs of PWDs (Allaire, Li and LaValley, 2003; Hagner, Dague and Phillips, 2015). Existing research consistently points to a disability pay gap, with PWDs receiving lower wages than non-disabled individuals for comparable work (Kruse, Schur, Rogers et al., 2018). PWDs are also often excluded from socially valued and prestigious forms of work due to discriminatory attitudes and practices (Nind and Croydon, 2021). Literature further highlights stagnation in PWDs' careers with limited or no opportunities for advancement (Kulkarni, 2016). As Molyneux (2021, p. 46) rightly notes, “*disabled people are only expected to ‘enter’ into, not ‘climb’ the labour market.”* Most remain stuck in entry-level roles while facing a glass ceiling that restricts upward mobility (Friedner, 2013; Kulkarni, 2016; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). This underscores a less discussed reality that barriers for PWDs extend beyond barriers to their hirings (Pérez-Conesa, Romeo and Yepes-Baldó, 2020). Despite this, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on PWDs’ employment at any cost (Nind and Croydon, 2021) with relatively little attention paid to the long-term inclusion of disabled workers in employment with opportunity to engage in meaningful work which is personally fulfilling and respectful of human dignity (Bueno, 2022; Laruffa, 2020; Nussbaum, 2000).

Employers’ negative attitudes toward disabled workers are grounded in various perceived concerns, including the costs of workplace accommodations (Lindsay, Cagliostro, Leck et al., 2019), particularly of those with severe disabilities (Bjørnshagen and Ugreninov, 2021; Heera and Devi, 2016), post-entry training needs (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2014), fears of underperformance (Vornholt et al., 2018), and assumptions about higher absenteeism (Heera and Devi, 2016; Pérez-Conesa et al., 2020). Colella and Bruyère (2011) also highlight ‘aesthetic anxiety’, where employers fear that the presence of disabled employees may negatively impact the image of their business in the eyes of customers. Negative attitude of colleagues represents another significant barrier for PWDs (Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022). Stigmatisation and stereotyping by co-workers are common, often rooted in misunderstandings about the nature of disability (Schur et al., 2017; Vornholt et al., 2018), and these misconceptions can lead to workplace incivility (Koch, Glade, Manno et al., 2022; Labelle-Deraspe and Mathieu, 2024). Such misconceptions add to workplace discrimination and reinforce exclusionary mechanisms (Nkansah-Dwamena, 2022). In response to such negative attitudes, research indicates that PWDs often internalise low expectations, prevent expressing their needs and demand less from employers or colleagues due to fear of appearing ungrateful (Suresh and Dyaram, 2020).

While the literature acknowledges the glass ceiling faced by women in employment (Cornelius and Skinner, 2005), disabled women remain among the most marginalised in the labour market, with their specific experiences rarely examined (Emmett and Alant, 2006). It is argued that women with disabilities and their unique challenges remain an especially overlooked group in disability employment research (Chan and Hutchings, 2024).

2.4.1.2.2 From Barriers to Inclusion: Strategies in the Literature

Having discussed the persistent challenges faced by PWDs in the workplace, it is also essential to highlight the strategies proposed in the literature to promote their inclusion (Agius, Heiman, Sula et al., 2024; Cavanagh, Bartram, Meacham et al., 2017). These include governmental interventions such as legislation and quota systems, organisational approaches such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and inclusive HR practices, and social mechanisms such as family support. For example, Pérez, Alcover and Chambel (2015) demonstrate that, alongside organisational support, family support significantly shapes the job attitudes of workers with disabilities, underscoring its importance for sustaining employment aspirations. Quota systems, designed to ensure the employment of a specific proportion of PWDs, are often framed as a tool for workplace inclusion. It is nonetheless a fact that despite the existence of disability legislation and quota systems in many countries, PWDs tend to experience discrimination in employment (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2014). Furthermore, quotas are often criticised for their orientation in a medical model of disability, portraying PWDs as deficient and pressuring them to present themselves as impaired to qualify for the quota. This conveys to employers that PWDs are a legal burden rather than valuable contributors. In practice, this often results in tokenish hiring of PWDs

(Sargeant, Radevich-Katsaroumpa and Innesti, 2018), lacking a genuine spirit of inclusivity (Shaw et al., 2022). Furthermore, literature indicates that quotas are frequently perceived as an act of charity (Sargeant et al., 2018). This perception stems from an implicit assumption underlying quotas that PWDs cannot compete in the labour market and therefore require legislative support. This is evident in the ILO report (2014, p. 11): "*quota legislation, even in those few countries where it is effective, risks undermining the idea that people with disabilities should be employed for the same reasons as non-disabled employees, that is, for their skills and talent".* Despite these observations, there is a dearth of studies discussing the effectiveness of quotes from those contexts where the legislative mechanism is not strong (Suresh and Dyaram, 2020).

Some studies have begun to emphasise the economic argument for hiring PWDs (Gould, Harris, Mullin et al., 2020) by highlighting potential benefits of this overlooked pool of talent (Kwan, 2020) through corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. However, disability within the CSR agenda is often framed as a business case (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015) and as a superficial attempt at diversity (Kirton and Greene, 2021), rather than as a matter of rights or justice. This instrumental framing of disability has drawn criticism for reducing disability inclusion to a strategic advantage which sidelines its ethical and social justice dimensions (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015). This is aptly captured by Greene and Kirton (2010), who note that within the field of equality and diversity, a key dynamic is the ongoing tension between social justice and the business case. This tension often remains less explored in contexts where inclusion is framed less as a legal or moral imperative and more as a conditional business opportunity (Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023). While CSR is an externally focused approach, fine-grained HR policies have been emerging in the literature as an internally focused approach to foster inclusive workplaces (Kwan, 2020; Pérez-Conesa et al., 2020). This approach aligns more with a broader social justice orientation. Fasciglione (2015) argues that HR practices must move beyond minimal legal compliance and take a proactive stance toward inclusion. In response to this, HR practices which promote fairness and dignity to employees with disabilities are seen as essential for creating genuinely inclusive organisations (Boehm, Schröder and Bal, 2021; Kwan, 2020; Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). However, this potential can only be realised if the influence of context-specific factors on HR practices for the inclusion of persons with disabilities is thoroughly investigated (Beatty et al., 2019; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). It is argued that social norms (Robeyns, 2017), gender norms (Verkerk, Busschbach and Karssing, 2001), employment rights (Egdell and Robertson, 2021; Hammell, 2022), institutional contexts (Gagnon and Cornelius, 2000; Subramanian, Verd, Vero et al., 2013) and labour market conditions (Miles, 2014; Sayer, 2012) must be evaluated through the lens of contextual factors to fully understand the employment conditions of PWDs (Stone and Colella, 1996). In this regard, Beatty et al. (2019) emphasise the need for future research to explore how national and cultural factors shape the employment treatment of PWDs within organisations. This illuminates a gap in literature, particularly in settings where legislative and cultural frameworks differ from the Western, educated, wealthy and democratic contexts (Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020; Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015).

2.4.1.3 Concluding Remarks on Persons with Disabilities and the Work Domain

While disability employment research has primarily been anchored on employer perspectives, what PWDs aspire to from their employment has remained underrepresented (Doan, Kim, Mooney et al., 2021). This gap is significant, as understanding inclusion and positive employment experiences from the viewpoint of disabled employees is crucial for advancing social justice and sustainable employment for PWDs (Aksnes and Ulstein, 2024; Doan et al., 2021). Therefore, this requires a shift towards participatory approaches – captured in the slogan "*Nothing about us, without us*" – to incorporate the voices of PWDs (Hein and Ansari, 2022) in matters significant to them. Furthermore, the existing literature on disability and employment is overwhelmingly skewed toward developed nations, particularly rooted in Anglo-Saxon contexts (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015). This creates a critical imbalance given that an estimated 80% of the world's disabled population lives in developing countries (United Nations, 2023). This disparity not only undermines the global relevance of the current scholarship but also obscures the voices and experiences from the Global South (Chhabra, 2021; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). The realities of disability and employment in the Global South often stand in stark contrast to those in the Global North, as the absence of social justice significantly hinders access to decent work conditions (Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023). As rightly pointed out by Jurado-Caraballo et al. (2022), there is a growing need not only to advance research on disability and work but also to integrate diverse disciplinary perspectives to inform academic inquiry and employer practices, to develop inclusive strategies for the effective incorporation of persons with disabilities in workplaces.

2.4.2 Persons with Disabilities and the Education Domain

While the preceding section focused on the work domain of PWDs, the following section will discuss PWDs in the education domain since the barriers to employment cannot be seen in isolation from impediments to education, as both stem from broader systemic inequalities that limit the opportunities of PWDs. This section will explore international frameworks on the right to education for PWDs and how these are translated in diverse social contexts.

International frameworks emphasise the right to educational equity and social inclusion for PWDs. Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006) affirms the right of PWDs to inclusive education at all levels, holding states responsible for ensuring access to education for all based on equal opportunity. Similarly, the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) marked a significant global commitment to inclusive education. Salamanca Statement asserts that: "*regular schools with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost–effectiveness of the entire education system*" (UNESCO, 1994, ix). The emphasis toward inclusive schools – in this landmark statement – is supported by educational, social, and economic justice that inclusive schools can promote teaching that benefits all learners, foster social cohesion by normalising difference and provide a cost-effective alternative to the segregated schooling system (Ainscow, Slee and Best, 2019). This steers the discussion towards the critique of special needs education (SEN).

SEN – underpinned by the medical model of disability – reinforces a segregated approach of education for PWDs (Shakespeare, 2013) by assuming that children with disabilities require different pedagogies that cannot occur in mainstream settings (Shakespeare, 2006). Disability scholars argue that this system plays a huge role in fostering the ‘othering’ of PWDs in the mainstream society (Goodley, 2017). Scior, Hamid, Hastings et al. (2015) assert that separate services – particularly educational institutes – for PWDs are a significant source of perpetuation of negative stereotypes and stigma. Educational institutions are often among the first social spaces where individuals from marginalised backgrounds experience emotional harm and exclusion (Norwich, 2014). Williamson (2014) claims that the challenges PWDs face during their educational journey are often more a result of the negative attitudes and behaviours of others than of their disabilities. This is further reinforced by Hanes et al. (2017), who state that individuals with disabilities are more disadvantaged by environmental and societal barriers than by their impairments themselves. Shakespeare (2006) asserts that segregated education not only reproduces social exclusion but also reinforces ableist assumptions (Campbell, 2009) that disability equates to deficiency. Such segregation dents the social integration of PWDs from an early age and impairs the social development of mutual acceptance among all learners. On the other hand, some scholars support the need for SEN provision. For instance, Farrell asserts that: “*education is, after all, a means to an end, and special schools may for some children provide the most effective means towards achieving these ends*” (Farrell, 2000, cited in Alzahrani, 2020, p. 4). SEN is often viewed as a mechanism to include learners who face difficulties in mainstream settings, yet it simultaneously excludes them from full inclusion within the mainstream system (Booth, 1998). Florian (2008) further contends that: "*the positioning of special needs education as both a problem for and a solution to injustice in education has highlighted the dilemmas of access and equity inherent in education systems that rely on different forms of provision for different types of learners*" (p. 203). Despite the potential benefits of special education for certain groups of learners, it is argued that special education may unintentionally limit access to quality educational resources and restrict the prospects for future inclusion in higher education and employment (Booth and Ainscow, 1998). MacKenzie, Owaineh, Bower et al. (2023) point out that the lack of understanding about disabilities and the lack of trust in the cognitive abilities of PWDs often leads to the provision of oversimplified curricula and the absence of career guidance for them. Shah (2007) further highlights that the limited academic scope of special education centres for PWDs, combined with inadequate educational content and a lack of career guidance, poses a significant barrier to their professional development and future employment opportunities. These educational inequalities are not only pedagogical concerns but also pose serious challenges to lifelong growth and intersect with broader issues of identity, rights, recognition and social justice (Skidmore, 1999).

Inclusive education (IE) has been internationally recognised as a more appropriate and effective alternative to the traditional SEN model. The social model of disability underpins ideas of IE by shifting the focus from individual impairments towards the systemic barriers that hinder participation and learning (Donald and Frank, 2023). IE emphasises that the educational environment should accommodate diverse learners rather than treating the child as the problem (Alzahrani, 2020). Ainscow and Miles (2008) clarify the confusion surrounding the concept of ‘inclusive education’, arguing that it goes beyond merely integrating learners with special needs into mainstream schools. Inclusion involves actively addressing exclusion and reshaping educational cultures, policies, and practices to effectively respond to the full diversity of all the learners, not only those with disabilities (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; UNESCO, 2020). IE is recognised as a matter of human rights (Davis, Gillett-Swan, Graham et al., 2020) and a vital mechanism for fostering social cohesion (Ghosh, 2021). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) contend that inclusive classrooms – by accommodating diverse learning needs – contribute to a sense of social acceptance and belonging for all the learners. However, several scholars acknowledge that the pursuit of IE remains a challenging endeavour marked by many structural obstacles (Alzahrani, 2020; Croll and Moses, 2000). Skidmore (1999) offers a sociological perspective on the challenges of implementing inclusive education, arguing that these stem not only from educational institutions but from broader structural disadvantages. The debate between SEN and IE continues to persist in the contemporary discourse (Imray and Colley, 2017). As highlighted by Florian (2008, p. 202), special learners face the dilemma “*between rights to education (access) and rights in education (equity)*”. Smith and Thomas (2006) note that this academic tension has centred on the ‘location’ of special learners rather than on the quality of education and support they receive. Furthermore, literature suggests that barriers to IE are multifaceted, encompassing attitudinal, institutional and resource-related challenges that impede the effective implementation of inclusive practices (Ainscow and Miles, 2008).

The barriers to implementation of IE are particularly stark in the context of the Global South (GS). International frameworks on IE, although appealing, are often rooted in Global North values, which may not align with the complex realities of GS. These contexts are marked by intersecting challenges such as resource deprivations, poverty, post-colonial legacies and inequality across diverse social identities, which influence educational access and outcomes (Kamenopoulou and Karisa, 2023). The uncritical transfer of Northern IE models into these contexts often overlooks broader structural and intersectional dimensions of exclusion, which are shaped by local histories, economies, and sociocultural and geopolitical conditions (Kamenopoulou and Karisa, 2023). Grech (2015) describes this problem within the field of disability in particular and calls for an urgent need to understand issues of IE from the perspectives of PWDs, researchers and policymakers in the Global South, grounded in their local realities.

2.4.3 Persons with Disabilities and Community Participation

While employment and education are critical domains that shape the life experiences of PWDs, their ability to lead meaningful lives is deeply influenced by their roles and participation within the broader community. Having explored the institutional structures of employment and education, the focus now shifts to the communal spaces where PWDs build solidarity, exercise agency, and pursue broader aspirations for community empowerment.

Community is understood as a network of relationships that provide individuals with a sense of belonging, identity and mutual support (Delanty, 2008). Douglas (2010, p. 539) equates the notion of community with the positive aspects of society, describing it as “*good things that will improve individual wellbeing by connecting with others and bring benefits to society as a whole*.” Community participation refers to the active involvement of individuals in collective activities and is often seen as a strategy for addressing social inequalities (Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000). This perspective is rooted in the understanding that community participation can play an essential role in community development (Tufte and Mefalopulos, 2009).

Community–based approach to participation and development requires the active involvement of communities in designing and implementing development programs that shape their futures (Chawa, Putra and Purba, 2021). Empowerment – in the context of community development – involves the capacity to hold public and private institutions accountable and to advocate for the implementation of inclusive development strategies (Saegert, 2006). The participatory development approach aims to foster empowerment by promoting social justice, enhancing community capabilities and ensuring meaningful participation of key stakeholders (Wahid, Ahmad, Talib et al., 2017). This approach holds particular significance for PWDs as it offers opportunities not only for social inclusion but also for the exercise of agency and contribution to collective well-being (Milner and Kelly, 2009). Historically marginalised and often excluded from formal institutional spaces, PWDs find empowerment through relational and collective supports, ranging from family support (Burke, Patton and Taylor, 2016) to mutual support networks and advocacy groups (Goodley, 2005). Their engagement in these spaces challenges medically deficient narratives and reframes them not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents of change within their communities (Charlton, 1998). In this way, community participation becomes a pathway for both individual empowerment and inclusive community development.

The idea of community participation holds historical roots in the activism of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the early 1970s. UPIAS challenged segregated systems and advocated for independent living, collective empowerment and inclusion (Finkelstein, 1980). These principles continue to shape the contemporary understandings of community participation among PWDs. Community participation is not only a foundational principle in disability rights activism but is also strongly embedded in international policy frameworks. UNCRPD’s Article 29 recognises community participation as a fundamental human right (CRPD, 2018; UNCRPD, 2006). Similarly, SGDs for 2030 clearly articulate inclusive and participatory approaches for development (United Nations, 2015). These ideas of community participation as a means to bring about change are firmly rooted in Paulo Freire’s (1970, p. 35) pedagogies of development which articulate the role of critical consciousness – *conscientização* (conscientization) – as a foundational process through which the oppressed engage in participatory approaches to empowerment (Darder, 2017; Ibrahim, 2017). Freire’s (1970) work highlights that individuals on the margins of society possess the analytical capacity to critically reflect on their lived realities and act as catalysts for change. Clark, Biggeri and Frediani (2019) contend that participation to induce change by those at the margins of society holds fundamental value for their quality of life.

Although the international discourse is increasingly moving away from top–down planning toward participatory, community-driven and bottom-up approaches to development (Wahid et al., 2017), the mainstream literature on disability still largely frames around participation through top-down intervention strategies (Chawa et al., 2021). Scant literature highlights the role of bottom-up approaches in the form of grassroots-led initiatives – such as self-help groups and OPDs (Organisations of Persons with Disabilities) – in addressing the systemic challenges faced by PWDs. These self-help organisations appear instrumental in fostering empowerment through community-level engagement and collective action, thereby advancing social inclusion. Beyond advocating for rights, these self-help organisations function as vital platforms where PWDs can mobilise, share experiences and assert their voices in shaping their social realities (Raj and Joseph, 2025). Most of the literature discusses PWDs' involvement in top-down intervention, which often positions them as participants in externally designed development programs, with limited recognition of how they drive change from within their communities. As a result, discussions around self-led and bottom-up strategies for community development and empowerment among PWDs remain scarce in mainstream literature. Milner and Kelly (2009, p. 59) argue that meaningful social change for marginalised groups has historically emerged from the socio-political margins and has been driven by those directly affected. In support of this, Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) contend that in marginalised settings, it is critical to engage with local traditions, kinship ties and community-specific survival strategies rather than formal civic channels of development. These arguments underscore the need to explore and value grassroots forms of community participation that are deeply embedded in the lived experiences, cultural practices and informal networks of PWDs, which have gained little space in mainstream disability literature (Bachfischer, Barbosa, Rojas et al., 2023).

2.5 Concluding Reflections on Global, Theoretical, and Lived Perspectives on Disability

This literature review has so far synthesised key theoretical frameworks and global debates on disability, while also exploring the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in the areas of employment, education, and community participation. The review has highlighted that while global frameworks emphasise rights and inclusion, the lived realities of PWDs often remain shaped by structural inequalities, cultural attitudes, and limited access to opportunities. These insights provide a foundation for understanding disability experiences across contexts. To develop an understanding of how these global themes manifest in the local research context, the discussion now turns to the disability context of Pakistan.

2.6 Disability Context in Pakistan

Fujiura, Park, and Rutkowski-Kmitta (2005, p. 295) underscore how little is known about the everyday lives and social realities of people with disabilities in developing countries. Within the Pakistani context, this observation remains acutely relevant even in 2025 as limited research and visibility continue to hinder the lived realities of PWDs (Akram, Buis, Sultana et al., 2025; Hussain, Alam and Ullah, 2022; Razzaq and Rathore, 2020). The British Council has consistently flagged the scale of disability in Pakistan, stating that up to 27 million people may be living with a disability (British Council, 2014, 2019). Although no recent and reliable national data exist, it is expected that this figure may have risen to as high as 31 million (British Council, 2019). The continued absence of updated disability data reflects a broader neglect of disability as a social priority. This data gap reinforces the systemic exclusion of PWDs from meaningful participation in various spheres of life (British Council, 2019). A well-documented cyclical relationship between disability and poverty has been established globally (Graham, Moodley and Selipsky, 2013; Rahman and Parvez, 2024), and Pakistan appears to be no exception (British Council, 2019; Singal, Bhatti and Malik, 2011).

Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in July 2011, to promote laws and policies in favour of PWDs and target any biased law or policy against them (Gul, 2020). Since then, several legislative measures have been enacted at both the federal and provincial levels (Appendix-1). However, a critical issue that remains unaddressed is the absence of effective implementation mechanisms for these policies and laws (Gul, 2020). Further, it has been noted that the dissolution of federal government power through the 18th Amendment created significant confusion regarding the assumption of responsibilities for the execution of these policies between the provinces and the federal government. Another loophole in the legislative framework is the lack of appointment of a definite regulatory body to execute the check-and-balance mechanism for legislation (British Council, 2019).

The dominant understanding of disability in the Pakistani context remains heavily shaped by the medical discourse of disability (Dixon, 2023). The deficit-based language in Disabled Persons Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance, 1981 reflects this approach: "*A disabled person means a person who, on account of injury, disease or congenital deformity, is handicapped for undertaking any gainful profession or employment in order to earn his livelihood, and includes a person who is blind, deaf, physically handicapped or mentally retarded*" (Government of Pakistan, 1981). Such terminology is not only derogatory (British

Council, 2019) but also perpetuates exclusion by framing PWDs primarily through their impairments rather than their rights (Singal et al., 2011). Institutional discourse about disability in Pakistan underpins the general social perception of disability in terms of personal affliction and results in stigma in society (Dixon, 2023). This further cultivates a culture of sympathy and pity towards PWDs (Ali, 2024) and encourages a charitable approach instead of a rights-based understanding (British Council, 2019). This charitable approach has also been institutionalised through various political events where concern for PWDs is shown through the distribution of rations, free wheelchairs or other assistive devices in front of cameras. These perceptions are further reinforced by the visible presence of PWDs engaged in street begging, which continues to shape public attitudes (British Council, 2014, 2019). The intersection of gender norms and disability creates a particularly marginalised position for women with disabilities in Pakistan (British Council, 2019; Dixon, 2023; Mansoor and Abid, 2025).

Social misunderstandings about disabilities, such as viewing them as a curse, a divine test or a punishment for parental sins (Dixon, 2023; Naznin and Tabassum, 2021; Singal et al., 2011), are further fuelled by limited social interactions with PWDs, contributing to continued stigmatisation and discrimination (Ali, 2024). However, Akbar and Woods (2020), in their study of Pakistani parents raising children with disabilities in England, found that religious beliefs served as a key coping mechanism. Participants interpreted disability as *the Will of God*, *a blessing*, or *a divine test*, and drew strength from prayer and gratitude. This framing enabled religion to play a role in fostering acceptance and resilience.

In the context of disability and education in Pakistan, the majority of special schools for persons with disabilities are state-funded. At the same time, a smaller number operate through self-help initiatives or NGO support. Mainstream schools – both public and private – typically have limited capacity to include PWDs due to infrastructural constraints (Upadhayay and Kakar, 2024), and their acceptance is often contingent on the type of disability the school can accommodate (Singal et al., 2011). Usually, people with mild disabilities have better prospects of being accepted into regular schools. The matter is intensified due to the lack of any institutional efforts to consider the needs of different vulnerable groups in mainstream education. Furthermore, the majority of special schools are located in developed cities, whereas the prevalence of disability is higher in rural areas (British Council, 2019). Only 5% of school-aged children with disabilities are enrolled in special education schools, while the remaining majority have no access to any formal education (Hafeez, 2019). Though the Educational Policy of 2017 loosely aspires to the idea of inclusive education, it is neither well-defined in legislation at the federal or provincial levels (Hafeez, 2020; Shaukat, 2023), nor is it effectively implemented (Kamran and Bano, 2025). As a result, those with severe disabilities are left with only the option of special schools (Shaukat, 2023) or no schooling at all (Singal, 2016). In lower socio-economic families in Pakistan, a child’s education is seen as an investment in their future and their ability to support parents in old age. This logic is often absent in the case of PWDs, as families struggle to believe that such an investment will be redeemed. The perception is even harsher for girls with disabilities (Singal, 2016). Therefore, PWDs from lower socio-economic backgrounds are left with limited options: public special schools, public mainstream schools (if admitted), religious schooling or no schooling at all. This leads to their isolation from mainstream society from an early age (Shaukat, 2023; Upadhayay and Kakar, 2024). Meanwhile, special education in Pakistan faces persistent policy, financial and social challenges. Frequent policy shifts, weak administration and insufficient funding have led to limited access, poor infrastructure and untrained teaching staff (Hafeez, 2020). Literature highlights that special schools in Pakistan are inadequate in preparing PWDs for later life (Hammad and Singal, 2015). Compounding this issue, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan do not offer a promising picture for PWDs. Few PWDs make it to this level, and those who do face similar barriers as in early years (Naz, Majeed and Sulman, 2024). While much has been written about the obstacles faced by PWDs in accessing education in Pakistan, their aspirations and goals related to education remain underexplored (Hammad and Singal, 2015).

Moving to the employment context for PWDs, there is no reliable state data on their employment status in Pakistan, raising serious concerns about their severe underrepresentation (Ali, 2024). A World Bank estimate indicates that 71 per cent of PWDs in Pakistan are unemployed (British Council, 2019). The situation is even more concerning for women with disabilities who are already among the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in Pakistani society (Dixon, 2023). Literature further points out that PWDs in Pakistan are disadvantaged in the job market (Ali, 2024) primarily due to two factors: inaccessible infrastructure (Hussain et al., 2022; Sabar, Kanwal and Bashir, 2024) and negative employer perceptions about PWDs (Ayub and Babar, 2022). To improve workplace inclusion of PWDs, employment quotas have been enacted through legislation (Gul, 2020). However, literature reveals that these quotas are widely ignored by both private and public sector organisations in Pakistan (Arsh and Darain, 2019). An affordable penalty, limited incentives and a weak enforcement mechanism provide space for the continued exclusion of PWDs from the employment sphere despite increased employment quotas (Ali, 2024; British Council, 2019). Critics also argue that quotas can undermine merit-based competition (Ali, 2024) and provoke resentment among other groups (Rathore and Iftikhar, 2011). Moreover, these quotas reinforce the existing image of PWDs as charity-dependent (British Council, 2019), leading to the perpetuation of disability discrimination. Several studies have questioned the actual impact of quotas in integrating PWDs into the labour market in the Pakistani context (Arsh and Darain, 2019; Gul, 2020; Sajjad, 2008). While much of the literature on disability and employment in Pakistan focuses on outcome-based barriers and employer perspectives, there is a limited understanding of what PWDs themselves expect from their inclusion in the workplace.

PWDs in Pakistan face systemic challenges that span across almost all domains of life (Sightsavers, 2017). Despite legislative provisions and policy commitments, widespread issues – such as inaccessible infrastructure (Bhatti, Hussain and Iqbal, 2025), which is especially severe in remote areas (British Council, 2019), discriminatory attitudes (Dixon, 2023), limited access to quality education (Hafeez, 2020), unemployment (Ali, 2024), and poor implementation of disability laws (Gul, 2020) – continue to marginalise PWDs in everyday life (British Council, 2019; SPRC, 2021). In response to these systemic barriers, PWDs in Pakistan have increasingly stepped forward to advocate for their rights (Awan, 2024). This has led to the emergence and growing importance of Disability Rights Action Group (Hassan, Javed, Shahid et al., 2024) and Organisations of Persons with

Disabilities (Handicap International, 2011). These organisations engage in policy advocacy to influence legislation and promote the implementation of disability rights frameworks (Awan, 2024; Hassan et al., 2024). Grey literature celebrates the success of OPDs in passing disability Rights 2020, which is a landmark legislation (Kizilbash, 2020) covering areas like the political participation of persons living with disabilities, equity in education and employment, equality before the law, ease of access and mobility, and protection from violent, abusive, intolerant and discriminatory behaviour (Ministry of Human Rights, 2020). Beyond advocacy, these organisations actively participate in awareness campaigns to challenge societal stigmas and misconceptions about disabilities to promote a more inclusive environment (Hussain and Muhammad, 2024). They also provide capacity-building programs by equipping PWDs with essential skills and knowledge to navigate societal structures effectively. Despite the critical role played by these organisations, there remains a noticeable gap in the academic literature examining how disability activist groups and OPDs are emerging as collective voices and driving grassroots-level change in Pakistan.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

The reviewed literature offers an understanding of how disability is conceptualised globally, with a growing emphasis on inclusive and participatory frameworks. However, global literature also reveals a limited engagement with the lived experiences, aspirations, and agency of persons with disabilities across various domains of life. This gap is similarly evident in literature focusing on Pakistan. Moreover, the literature highlights that disability in Pakistan is experienced in ways that often diverge significantly from how disability is framed within international models and policy frameworks.

While this study critiques the limitations of dominant Western disability frameworks in capturing the lived realities of PWDs in the Global South, it does not reject the notion of universal rights or justice. Instead, it adopts a context-sensitive perspective – one that recognises the need to understand disability, inclusion, and participation as shaped by specific cultural, institutional, and social conditions. This approach centres the voices and aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan by recognising that universal goals must be grounded in local realities to be meaningfully realised.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical lens guiding this research. As established in the literature review, the Capability Approach (CA) offers a more promising framework for understanding disability-related issues, while also integrating key principles from other major disability models. The Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999) thus serves as the main framework for this study through which the aspirations and lived experiences of PWDs in Pakistan are understood. This chapter brings forth key dimensions of CA and engages with the differences between Sen's and Nussbaum's versions to assess which aligns more swiftly with this study. While the Capability Approach offers a valuable foundation, it is crucial to recognise that it is not a complete theory but rather an open-ended framework (Robeyns, 2017). Therefore, its methodological incompleteness calls for an integration with additional theoretical tools (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009, p. 27) to capture the social realities that influence capabilities. This necessitated engaging with interdisciplinary literature to formulate an integrated framework. The developed integrated framework serves as a tool for analysing how PWDs navigate and negotiate constraints and opportunities in their pursuit of meaningful lives in Pakistan.

3.2 Capability Approach as Proposed Overarching Framework

The capability approach was initially conceived by an Indian economist and Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999), and it was further extended in a social justice dimension by philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2000). The capability approach is a framework for assessing individual well-being and evaluating social arrangements. Sen developed the approach as a critique of income and resource-based approaches to wellbeing and justice (Crocker, 1992). CA seeks to answer simple yet powerful questions: 1) "*What are people free to do and be?*" and 2) *What have people chosen to be and do*?" (Garcés, 2020, p. 270). The main crux of CA lies in the "*capability set that a person has, that is, the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys leading the kind of life he or she has reason to value*" (Sen, 1999, p. 87).

3.2.1 Key Elements of Sen's Capability Approach

Sen's Capability approach is premised on five key features: capabilities, functionings, resources, conversion factors and agency. In Sen's framework, 'capabilities' are not merely the resources needed to achieve a certain level of satisfaction; instead, they represent the real freedoms and opportunities an individual has to choose particular ways of being and doing – referred to as *functionings* (Robeyns, 2017). The sum of all capabilities an individual could achieve is their *capability set*, which, in other words, is their freedom to achieve well-being (Sen, 1999). Sen (1989, p. 44) states that "*capability reflects a person's freedom to choose between different ways of living".* 'Functionings' represent a person's actual state of being or doing (Alkire, 2005). In the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model (WHO, 2001), the term functioning is used as a clinical and descriptive classification tool, referring to observable aspects of health, body functions, activities, and participation. In contrast, in the Capability Approach, functionings refer to the actual 'beings and doings' that a person has reason to value, such as being educated, being respected, or participating in community life. While the ICF adopts an objective and standardised usage of the term, the CA embeds functionings in personal values, choice, and human well-being. ‘Resources’ – also known as capability input – are the possessions of tangible or intangible goods available to a person and are the means to achieve capabilities (Sen, 1992, p. 33). The CA focuses on how individuals transform their accessible (material or non-material) resources into functionings (Egdell and Robertson, 2021). Sen’s initial motivation to work on capability lies in his disagreement with the Rawlsian school of thought (Rawls, 1971), where the fair distribution of resources was a measure of equality in society. Sen argues that the possession of resources is not a sufficient indicator of people’s well-being, and resource-based measures often ignore individual differences in transforming resources into well-being (Sen, 1999). Thus, human diversity is one of the core concepts and a motivation behind the development of the CA (Robeyns, 2017). An important aspect of human diversity is the idea that people hold distinct abilities to convert their available resources into functionings (Kjeldsen and Bonvin, 2015). This diversity within the CA is interpreted through the role of conversion factors. Conversion factors are the conditions or circumstances that influence how a person can transform resources into functionings – the actual beings and doings they value (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009; Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Sen, 1999, 2009). Conversion factors can be personal, social, or environmental. By highlighting these factors, the Capability Approach goes beyond resource-based evaluations and draws attention to the real opportunities people have to live the lives they value. Impairment is said to be a potential source of variation in the conversion of capability inputs into capability sets (Burchardt, 2004). Bickenbach (2014) contends that it is in the sphere of ill health or impairment (as a personal conversion factor) where the two schools of thought – i.e., Rawlsian and Sen's Capability – fought their battles. Sen argued that disabled people are disadvantaged in "*converting income and resources into good living*" (Sen, 2009, p. 258). Sen termed this phenomenon '*conversion handicap'* to explain that disabled people require extra effort, costs, and resources to gain the same results or living standards as those without disabilities (2009, p. 258). The CA gives individuals the substantive freedom for autonomous action and sees them as empowered beings who are able to decide what they wish to achieve based on their own concept of a 'good life' (Sen, 1985). 'Agency' within the CA is mainly envisioned through the aspect of choice in achieving functionings and capabilities. Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) assert that the dynamic interaction of conversion factors and agency is the real driver behind the achievement of functionings and capabilities.

While Sen's capability approach has been widely influential, it has also faced significant criticism. One major critique of the Capability Approach is its 'methodological individualism'. Sen's strong emphasis on "*what a person has reason to value and is able to achieve*" (1999) places significant focus on individual agency (Dean, 2009). While this highlights personal freedom and responsibility, it can lead to an individual-level analysis (Gore, 1997) that potentially overlooks the collective (Evans, 2002; Ibrahim, 2006), structural (Stewart and Deneulin, 2002), and relational (Smith and Seward, 2009) dimensions of human well-being that are mandatory for understanding how real opportunities are shaped and constrained. However, this critique may be overstated, particularly when considering the context sensitivity of the CA

(Broderick, 2018). The CA considers an individual’s conception of well-being and a good life in relation to their social, cultural, and political circumstances (Robeyns, 2017). A deeper understanding of the approach shows that, since functionings and capabilities belong to individuals, in one way, the CA can be said to be individualistic in nature. Therefore, it is individualistic in terms of the unit of analysis or judgment; however, it is not individualistic ontologically. It does consider several social and environmental conversion factors on which functionings and capabilities are dependent. So, it is individualistic in terms of the unit of analysis and, at the same time, non-individualistic ontologically (Robeyns, 2005). Thus, the much-celebrated critique of the ‘individualism’ of the CA (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009) is, in true spirit, ‘ethical individualism’ (Robeyns, 2017).

Another major criticism of the CA is that it remains an open-ended framework rather than a fully developed theory (Robeyns, 2017). Sen deliberately left it as an open-ended approach, but this has also raised concerns about its theoretical completeness and practical application (Clark, 2005; Robeyns, 2005). To address this limitation, several scholars recommend complementing the CA with other theories and conceptual tools that suit the requirements of a particular study (Stewart and Deneulin, 2002; Deneulin and Shahani, 2009; Robeyns, 2017). Another similar issue is Sen’s lack of a definitive list of capabilities, which some argue makes the approach too open-ended and difficult to apply in practice (Nussbaum, 2000; Robeyns, 2005). Furthermore, Nussbaum (2000) argues that Sen’s reliance on democratic processes and a bottom-up approach to capabilities can significantly disadvantage marginalised and oppressed communities. The freedom of individuals to choose the life they value is strongly determined by economic, social, structural, and cultural factors inherent in their surroundings

(Broderick, 2018; Robeyns, 2017). These factors are not merely external hurdles; they are also internalised in individuals' thinking and reflected in their life choices. This issue has also been raised by Nussbaum (2001) as adaptive preferences – the idea that individuals living in deprived situations tend to acclimatise to their circumstances. Jon Elster (1983) illustrated this phenomenon of psychological adjustment through his well-known 'sour grapes' example. Since the capability approach by default considers individuals as agents rather than patients, adaptive preferences seem problematic for the agency. Sen echoed the notion of adaptation when he mentions that the "*considerations of 'feasibility' and of 'practical possibility' enter into what we dare to desire and what we are pained not to get*" (Sen 1985, p. 15). Nussbaum (2001) observes that adaptive preferences are prevalent among groups that have faced long-standing discrimination, as such experiences can lead individuals to internalise beliefs about their inferiority. However, Freire (2000) asserts that people living in marginalised, discriminated, and unequal conditions are best positioned to judge their circumstances. Similarly, Robeyns (2005) contends that this critique does not fundamentally undermine the effectiveness of CA. Robeyns (2005) also observes that the flexibility of the CA enables researchers to remain sensitive to adaptive preferences by embedding the evaluation process in participatory and reflective practices, rather than assuming stated preferences at face value. However, this criticism motivated Nussbaum (2011) to develop a pre-defined list of central capabilities. The following section discusses the core tenets of Nussbaum's version of the Capability Approach. It concludes with a reflection on which version aligns more closely with the aims of this research.

3.2.2 Key Elements of Nussbaum's Capability Approach

Nussbaum (2011) developed a concrete list of essential capabilities – central human capabilities – framing them as part of a partial theory of justice aimed at establishing political principles that should be guaranteed to all citizens by their governments through the constitution (Robeyns, 2005). She contends that these capabilities are universal and essential for all individuals to lead a life with human dignity. Her central human capabilities consist of (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination, and thought, (5) emotions, (6) practical reason, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play, and (10) political and material control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2011). Nussbaum particularly emphasises two capabilities, which she claims, "suffuse all the other capabilities" (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 89). These include: 1) *practical reason*, which involves "*being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life,"* and 2) *affiliation*, which means being able "*to engage in various forms of social interactions [and] being able to be treated as [a] dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others*" (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 79–80).

Nussbaum's identification of central human capabilities has played an essential role in operationalising the CA. However, her framework has also been critiqued on several grounds. Her approach has been criticised for being overly paternalistic and for disregarding cultural relativism (Gasper, 2002; Khader, 2018; Robeyns, 2005), as it proposes a predefined list of capabilities without necessarily accounting for cultural contexts or for what people themselves value in their own lives. Despite these criticisms, Nussbaum (2011) defends the idea of a universal list of capabilities and argues that rejecting cultural relativism is essential to ensure that everyone benefits from at least a minimum threshold of fundamental entitlements. Nussbaum’s list has been applauded for providing a clear normative benchmark for what constitutes a minimally decent human life (Claassen, 2016; Vizard and Burchardt, 2007). While Nussbaum’s list has been praised for its clarity and policy relevance, its universal application has sparked debate. Critics argue that it can be overly idealistic in non-Western contexts and risk adopting a paternalistic stance (Deneulin, 2002; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 2004). It is also argued that Nussbaum’s approach may be inadequate in settings where governments do not prioritise these capabilities as fundamental human rights (Gonzalez, 2013).

3.2.3 Comparing Sen’s and Nussbaum’s Capability Approaches

Sen’s Capability Approach (1999, 2009) finds its roots in social choice theory, whereas Nussbaum (2011) extends the approach into the domains of philosophy and human rights (Saigaran, Karupiah and Gopal, 2015). Sen’s focus is on identifying real freedoms – what individuals are able to do and to be – highlighting opportunities and agency (Robeyns, 2005). In contrast, Nussbaum presents a list of capabilities as entitlements that every individual should possess to live a dignified life (Crocker, 1992). As Norwich (2014, p. 19) explains, the key distinction lies in how they treat agency: “for Sen, *agency is the key aspect of a capability*,” while for Nussbaum, “*the central capabilities are more an entitlement than something actively chosen*.” This comparison holds particular relevance for the present study. In the context of disability, it is a well-established argument that the agency of disabled people is often overlooked (Shakespeare and Watson, 2021). This study departs from Nussbaum’s version of the Capability Approach.

It aligns more closely with Sen's framework, which is favoured for its open-ended structure and its emphasis on individual agency and the freedom to pursue personally valued goals. Accordingly, Sen's Capability Approach is adopted as the guiding theoretical framework, while Nussbaum's contributions are discussed where they complement, critique, or diverge from Sen's position.

3.3 Theoretical Lens Guiding this Research

This section provides a detailed discussion of the core concepts of the Capability Approach that inform this study. It also draws on interdisciplinary literature to address the recognised limitations of the Capability Approach, adapting it to meet the specific requirements of the research.

3.3.1 Well-being through Functionings, Capabilities, and Aspirations

The central normative claim of the Capability Approach is that individuals should have the real freedom to achieve well-being. Well-being is understood not simply as the possession of resources or the satisfaction of preferences, but as the actual ability to achieve valuable states of being and doing in life. The evaluative space of well-being consists of individuals' capabilities and functionings. Functionings indicate what a person is successful in doing or being (Sen, 1985, p. 19). These functionings can range from basic ones, such as access to nutrition, health, and life expectancy, to more complex ones, such as having self-respect or participating in a community (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Capabilities refer to the different 'functioning bundles' from which an individual has the freedom to choose to pursue a life they have reason to value (Sen, 1992, pp. 40–45). Sen (1999, p. 75) distinguishes between functionings and capabilities by explaining that the former refer to the things a person actually does, while the latter concern the substantive freedoms a person has to do or be those things. Thus, well-being in the CA is framed in terms of both the achieved outcomes (functionings) and the genuine opportunities (capabilities) available to pursue a life one has reason to value (Sen, 1999). As Robeyns (2005, p. 95) notes, "*well-being, justice and development should be conceptualised in terms of people's capabilities to function; that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities that they want to engage in and be whom they want to be*". She further reinforces that "*the distinction between achieved functionings and capabilities is between the realised and the effectively possible*" (p. 95).

While the general CA literature distinguishes between what individuals are free to 'be and do' (capabilities) and what they actually achieve (functionings), Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) have also explored the nature of certain functionings and how these may play a particularly enabling or constraining role in the achievement of other functionings. In this regard, Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) introduce two key concepts: *fertile functionings* and *corrosive disadvantage*. The idea of 'fertile functionings' indicates that some functionings not only contribute to well-being on their own but also enable the development of other capabilities. Authors identified 'future security' as a fertile functionings for research on migrants (Wolff and De-Shalit, 2007). Austin (2018) identified the capability to have 'affiliation' as a fertile functionings for people suffering from dementia. The idea of 'corrosive disadvantage' highlights that "*a disadvantage is corrosive if it has particularly bad effects on other dimensions of people's lives*" (Wolff and De-Shalit, 2007, p. 55). Such a disadvantage – where one is unable to attain a certain functioning in one domain – not only harms well-being in that particular domain but also negatively affects multiple other capabilities.

The Capability Approach emphasises the importance of having the freedom to achieve valued functionings; however, it is equally important to consider what happens when such freedoms are lacking. This brings attention to the concept of capability deprivation, which reflects the absence of real opportunities for individuals to be and do what they have reason to value. The idea of capability deprivation is also embedded in Sen’s work, who notes that ‘“*poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely as lowness of incomes*” (Sen, 1999, p. 87). Capability deprivation holds relevance for disability research, as it reveals the hidden layers of exclusion for PWDs – not just what they lack in resources, but what they are prevented from being and doing (Burchardt, 2004; Dubois and Trani, 2009; Mitra, 2006; Terzi, 2004). Thus, capability deprivation refers to situations where people are unable to achieve what they have reason to value due to a lack of real opportunities or freedoms. Since Sen refers only to those capabilities that people can achieve or choose from (Sen, 2009, p. 236), a critical question arises: should the capabilities that people value but are unable to achieve be overlooked? This question opens up a discussion about aspirations.

Aspirations can be understood as individuals’ desires concerning different dimensions of their lives and well-being (Fruttero, Muller and Calvo-González, 2025). Anthropologist Appadurai (2004) coined the term ‘capacity to aspire’ to indicate the cultural and navigational capacity that empowers people to envision their future selves, create goals, and dedicate themselves to achieving them (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2022). Baillergeau and Duyvendak (2022) and

Leßmann (2024) contend that both Sen’s (1999) account of capabilities and Appadurai’s (2004) account of aspirations represent two sides of the same coin. Different capability theorists have also started envisioning aspirations as significant for well-being. Sen highlights that our aspirations are tied to our substantive freedom, or the practical possibility of achieving them (1985, 1992). Similarly, Ballet, Marchand, Pelenc et al. (2018) describe aspirations as a cognitive aspect of well-being. Ibrahim (2011, p. 8) associates well-being with the achievement of aspirations and the satisfaction that follows. Since well-being and the achievement of well-being lie at the heart of the Capability Approach (Robeyns, 2017), aspirations have gained a meaningful space within the evolving capability literature (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2022; Conradie and Robeyns, 2013; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022; Leßmann, 2024; Zimmermann, 2024). Therefore, aspirations have sometimes been used interchangeably with capabilities in literature focusing on disability (for example, Biggeri et al., 2011; Dubois and Trani, 2009; Trani et al., 2011). Furthermore, Capability theorists perceive the potential of aspiration as ‘agency-unlocking’ (Conradie and Robeyns, 2013; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022). Non-Capability literature also draws a close link between agency and aspirations by emphasising the influence of aspirations on human behaviour and how these motivate people to make choices and exert effort to achieve their aspired lives (Fruttero et al., 2025). Thus, aspirations – or the capability to aspire or the capacity to aspire – lie at the centre of agency, where people dream of what they value, think about alternative ways of living, and pursue and choose the life they value (Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022). However, scarce literature on capability empirically explores the relationship of aspirations in unlocking agency mechanisms (Leßmann, 2022).

Literature also highlights that capabilities and aspirations are deeply shaped by the social context (Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022). The social context not only holds the power to diminish capabilities and aspirations but can also negatively affect agency (Bazzani, 2023; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Sen, 1999). This, in turn, impacts the possibility of realising alternative futures (Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022; Muller, Fruttero, Calvo-González et al., 2024). In this context, Ibrahim (2011) asserts that unfulfilled aspirations lead towards a capability deficit, which further nurtures feelings of powerlessness and frustration. The capability deficit in such a situation leads towards '*intergenerational downward spiral of failed aspirations'* (Ibrahim, 2011). Now the question arises: what causes capability deficits, and why do aspirations remain unfulfilled? Sen attributes this to differences in the conversion of resources into capability sets (Sen, 1985, 1999). However, is this variation explained solely by conversion factors? This leads the discussion to another vital component of the CA, namely, conversion factors.

3.3.2 Conversion Factors

Conversion factors, within the Capability Approach, provide an intermediary step for understanding how resources are converted into capabilities (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009; Sen, 1999, 2009; Robeyns, 2005, 2017). Resources refer to the means or goods a person possesses, while conversion factors determine how effectively a person can use these resources to achieve valued functionings (Sen, 1999). The term 'conversion factor' captures the relationship between possessing a resource and realising particular functionings. Although the idea of conversion was central to Sen's overall argument for the Capability Approach, for a considerable time, he relied on only a small set of suggestive examples of personal characteristics or contextual circumstances that might influence such processes (Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018). This lack of a systematic account also fits with the broader aim of Sen's Capability Approach, which is designed as a flexible framework to be adapted to specific contexts, with explanations of how the mechanisms work. Sen's discussion of conversion over the decades has evolved to become more multi-dimensional, wide-ranging, and rooted in sociological perspectives. Ingrid Robeyns, in her well-known interpretation of Sen's Capability Approach, outlines three primary types of conversion factors that shape the extent to which individuals can turn resources into functionings (Robeyns, 2005, 2017). Personal conversion factors relate to individual characteristics, such as metabolism, physical condition, gender, intelligence, and skills. Social conversion factors arise from the societal context, including public policies, social norms, practices, and social hierarchies. Environmental conversion factors pertain to the physical or built environment in which a person lives, such as infrastructure, climate, geographical location, and topography. Yet, despite the recognition of these categories, applications of conversion factors within the Capability Approach have largely remained conceptual, with limited empirical engagement – particularly in disability research (Hick, 2016).

The distinction between resources and conversion factors, while conceptually significant in the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005), often remains blurred. The same element may be considered either a resource or a conversion factor, depending on the context and the researcher's perspective. Binder and Coad (2011, p. 328) describe this as the 'entanglement' or 'circularity' problem, whereby the same element may be interpreted as both a resource and a conversion factor. In this context, Zimmermann (2006, p. 480) and Hobson (2013) note that personal characteristics, social arrangements, and environmental structures cannot be intrinsically categorised as either capability inputs (resources) or conversion factors; rather, this distinction is an analytical choice. For instance, the same institutional arrangement – such as an inclusive education policy – may be regarded as an input when viewed as a resource provided to persons with disabilities, but also as a conversion factor when analysed in terms of how it enables or constrains the transformation of resources into valued functionings like autonomy, dignity, or employment. This fluidity is widely regarded as part of the CA's flexibility and context-sensitivity (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009; Robeyns, 2017). Importantly, this circularity is also evident in empirical research. For instance, Trani et al. (2011) identified the family role as both a conversion factor and a resource, whereas Gupta, Meershoek and De Witte (2022) highlighted the family specifically as a resource.

In earlier CA literature, conversion factors were often normatively framed as constraints or disadvantages. For instance, Sen (2009, p. 258) introduced the notion of a "conversion handicap" to highlight the difficulties in transforming resources into valued functionings. However, more recent contributions challenge this binary framing. Scholars such as Javornik and Yerkes (2020) and Hobson (2018) argue that conversion factors are not inherently positive or negative, but their framing is contextually shaped (Byskov, Kramm and Östlund, 2024). Byskov et al. (2024) and Sebastianelli (2016) add that their nature can only be understood through the interaction of multiple conversion factors. However, empirical literature does not sufficiently respond to these proposals.

Beyond conceptual and normative limitations, the Capability Approach has also been critiqued for its insufficient engagement with structural and institutional dynamics. While Sen (1985) acknowledges that individual differences shape how opportunities are converted into achievements, he does not fully explain how these differences become structurally embedded inequalities (Pitasse Fragoso, 2025). Deneulin (2008) argues that CA lacks the informational base to identify the root causes of deprivation, particularly those shaped by historical and institutional forces. As a result, CA risks offering surface-level diagnoses while overlooking deeper power structures – a point also raised by Sayer (2012), who warns against focusing on “symptoms instead of causes” (p. 580). Deneulin (2008) calls for greater attention to the “*structures of living together*” (p. 110). Whereas De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado (2024), Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018), Ibrahim (2017) and Leßmann (2022) draw attention to the overlooked role of structural factors within the Capability Approach, highlighting it as a missing piece in the framework’s analytical focus. This lack of structural depth has led to the charge of ‘structural individualism’ against the CA (Deneulin, 2008; Gangas, 2020). Critics argue that CA provides a top-down process of seeing the phenomenon, and the inherent abstractness of CA does not take into account the role of institutional realities and the ‘major sources of unfreedom’ (Sen 1999, p. 3) embedded in institutional practices (Miles, 2014; Sayer, 2012). This has been the reason that Sen’s framework has been critiqued for its limited engagement with social institutions and their structural role in shaping individual capabilities (Stewart and Deneulin, 2002). More recently, scholars such as Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) have proposed reconceptualising conversion factors as social structures, which may help unpack the mechanisms behind persistent disadvantage. Bazzani (2023) extends this proposal by viewing conversion factors as either constraints or enablers of agency. Yet, as Pitasse Fragoso (2025) notes, merely identifying conversion factors is not enough; what's needed is a deeper analytical lens to explore the historical, institutional, and structural interplay behind them. These critiques have led Capability scholars (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009; Deneulin, 2008; Drydyk, 2021; Gangas, 2020) to call for the integration of an explanatory lens alongside the CA – a need this study addresses by incorporating an institutional lens to analyse conversion factors.

3.3.2.1 Structural Dimensions of Conversion Factors: An Institutional Lens

Hodgson (2002) accuses mainstream economists of 'institutional blindness' – not due to a lack of awareness of institutions, but because of methodological limitations. Given that the Capability Approach has its intellectual roots in welfare economics, it has inherited some of this disciplinary orientation. While the Capability Approach offers a robust framework for assessing well-being and justice, it has been critiqued for its limited engagement with institutional and structural dimensions (Dean, 2009; De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado, 2024; Deneulin, 2008; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Leßmann, 2022; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002). This suggests that the CA, despite its normative richness, may exhibit a degree of institutional blindness when applied without sociological or institutional augmentation.

In social science literature, 'social structures' are defined as enduring patterns that shape and constrain individual actions and choices. Individuals are not fully autonomous; they are embedded within social systems that influence their opportunities and agency (Form and Wilterdink, 2025). Institutions, in this context, are understood as a core component of social structures. Institutions, as Hodgson (2007) defines them, are systems of rules that structure human interaction. When these rules are drawn upon with regularity, they become internalised through a process of habituation, giving rise to habits that shape everyday behaviour. These habits, in turn, are embedded within and reflective of broader social, cultural, and economic environments (Fleetwood, 2008). They derive their influence from, and simultaneously contribute to, the formation and reproduction of social norms, values, and practices. Hodgson (2007) argues that institutions are the most significant structures within the social sphere, forming the very fabric of social life.

Sen (1999) recognised the importance of institutions, stating that "*opportunities to function are dependable on what institutions exist which can be evaluated on their contributions to our freedom*" (p. 142). Yet, despite this acknowledgement, critics argue that Sen's Capability Approach lacks sufficient attention to institutional realities and the 'major sources of unfreedom' (Sen, 1999, p. 3) embedded within them (Miles, 2014; Sayer, 2012; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002). In her well-known *stylised static representation* of the Capability Approach, Robeyns (2005) indicates the role of social institutions in shaping conversion processes. However, much of the existing capability literature does not fully account for how these institutions influence individuals' ability to convert resources into real opportunities (Bass, Nicholson, and Subrahmanian, 2013).

In response to the Capability Approach's underdeveloped engagement with institutional and structural dimensions, the present study incorporates an institutional lens by drawing on Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework. In this study, the definition of institutions draws on Scott's (2013, p. 56) view that "*institutions* *comprise regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements which, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life*." This approach enhances the explanatory capacity of the Capability Approach by deepening the analysis of conversion factors and uncovering the structural mechanisms that underlie them. An institutional understanding offers insight into how macro-level factors interact with and shape the micro-level processes that affect the lives of PWDs.

At the conceptual level, institutional theory encompasses multiple propositions that aid in understanding complex, multifaceted phenomena. These include the notions of institutions, institutionalisation, actors, legitimacy, isomorphism, and deinstitutionalisation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). While institutional theory is a broad and multifaceted field, and not the primary theoretical framework for this research, this study engages with it selectively – drawing on concepts most relevant to understanding the structural dynamics that shape conversion factors. Scott's three-pillar framework (2013), which encompasses regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutions, provides valuable insights into how regulative structures, social norms, and shared beliefs influence the real freedoms available to persons with disabilities.

Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework outlines how stability and order are maintained within social contexts. Formal institutions – such as regulatory bodies, laws, and rules – exert coercive pressure, while informal institutions –shaped by norms, culture, and ethics – generate normative and cognitive pressures. The regulative pillar refers to formal rules, laws, and sanctioning mechanisms within a national context that govern particular kinds of behaviours and restrict others (Scott, 2013). It includes the establishment of legal frameworks, policies, and enforcement mechanisms designed to ensure compliance. From this perspective, behaviour is shaped by coercive pressures and the potential for legal or formal sanctions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In the context of disability, this pillar is reflected in government policies, legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms designed to promote inclusion and protect the rights of persons with disabilities (Järkestig Berggren, Rowan, Bergbäck et al., 2016). Unlike the regulative pillar, which operates through formal enforcement, the normative dimension governs actions through shared norms, roles, and moral obligations (Scott, 2013). Normative structures define what is considered morally or socially acceptable within a society. Within disability context, normative frameworks shape societal attitudes and organisational cultures toward principles such as equal opportunity, fairness, and respect for diversity (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015). The normative pillar operates through shared moral standards and ethics, which can drive disability-inclusive practices even in the absence of legal compulsion (Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016). This pillar is also associated with normatively-oriented stakeholders – such as professional associations, advocacy groups, and international bodies – that secure legitimacy by setting and monitoring standards of acceptable behaviour. Bodies like the United Nations have played a significant role in establishing global norms, particularly through the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). While the CRPD itself is a binding treaty, it has also led to the development of voluntary reporting mechanisms, benchmarking practices, and monitoring frameworks – some of which resemble soft accreditation systems that encourage compliance with disability-inclusive standards. These mechanisms help shape the expectations placed on governments, institutions, and service providers regarding the treatment and inclusion of persons with disabilities (Ineland, 2020). However, this raises a critical question: to what extent do soft accreditation mechanisms function in contexts where compliance with the regulative pillar is not aligned with normative expectations? This question also draws attention to the role of the cultural-cognitive pillar, which is informed by anthropological and psychological perspectives, recognising that shared beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions shape how people interpret the world around them (Scott, 2013). These perspectives enable individuals and groups to form identities, construct legitimacy, and create a shared sense of reality, thereby providing a foundation for social order. In the context of disability, cultural-cognitive elements include prevailing myths about disability, societal perceptions of the abilities – or assumed limitations – of persons with disabilities, and gendered perspectives that shape expectations and opportunities (Choudhury Kaul, Sandhu and Alam, 2021; Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016). It emphasises how institutionalized patterns of thought become deeply embedded and unquestioned, thus guiding behaviour automatically (Kulkarni, Gopakumar and Vijay, 2017).

Institutional pillars help to uncover the social and structural mechanisms that mediate the capabilities and aspirations of PWDs. Ineland's (2020) work draws on the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements of institutions to examine how welfare services for PWDs are structured and delivered in Sweden. Similarly, Moore's (2015) work also draws on the three-pillar framework to assess the motivations of Australian organisations engaged in disability employment. Choudhury et al. (2021) employed this institutional analysis to examine how the merchant class in India responds to disability. These applications of Scott's three-pillar framework support the relevance and utility of an institutional lens in understanding how disability-related practices are shaped across multiple levels. While institutional perspectives have been incorporated into Capability Approach analyses previously – for instance, in the work of Bass et al. (2013) and Nambiar (2013) – the lens of Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework to examine the structural role of conversion factors remains notably absent in Capability-based disability research.

The institutional understanding of conversion factors sheds light on how social structures condition the transformation of resources into capabilities. However, a sole reliance on structural analysis tends to present individuals as passive recipients of institutional influence, overlooking the active role people play in interpreting, adapting to, or resisting these very structures. This has also remained a persistent pitfall in disability research (Watson, 2019). This highlights the importance of engaging with the notion of 'agency' for a dynamic understanding of how individuals both shape and are shaped by the social structures that influence their capabilities.

3.3.3 Agency

In the Capability Approach, agency is an expression of "*what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good*" (Sen, 1985, p. 206). Sen's concept of agency is grounded in five main characteristics: (1) agency can only be exercised with respect to the goals of an agent; (2) agency encompasses both direct control and effective authority; (3) agency can be exercised for any kind of self-related or other-related goals; (4) agency encompasses rationality; and (5) agency bears the responsibility for the overall assessment of the state of affairs (Alkire, 2008).

Thus, the concept of agency within the Capability Approach is multidimensional, multi-motivated, and reflective (Garcés, 2020).

Sen (1985a) has woven the concept of agency intricately with the ideas of well-being, freedom, and achievement. In the Capability Approach, freedom comprises two aspects: the opportunity aspect and the process aspect. The opportunity aspect relates to capabilities and concerns people’s well-being – their real ability to be and do what they value in life. In contrast, the process aspect refers to agency and signifies people’s ability to shape their life conditions in accordance with their values and goals (Alkire, 2008; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). The relationship of agency with well-being is self-reinforcing but distinct at the same time (Sen, 1985a). The relationship between well-being and agency – within the CA – is clarified through the distinction between well-being goals and agency goals. If a person’s goals focus on their personal well-being, they reflect well-being freedom and well-being achievement. In contrast, if the goals are other-regarding – beyond personal gain – they reflect agency freedom and agency achievement. As Sen (1992) notes, well-being achievements constitute a subset of a person’s broader agency achievements. Thus, the agent – in Sen’s conception – holds the capacity to pursue not only self-goals but also ‘other-regarding’ goals (Robeyns, 2017). This space broadens the vision of the agent from being a mere maximiser of self-pursuit towards a more social welfare pursuer. As highlighted by Crocker and Robeyns (2009, p. 76), agency, in CA, “*provides space for a conception of freedom and responsibility that breaks decisively with any egoism that claims that humans are no more than – and are bound to be – strict maximisers of a narrowly defined self-interest*.” In this way, CA brings broader social goals within the bounds of agency and provides a broader conception of agency as being a multi-motivator (Garcés, 2020).

Within the Capability Approach, human development is closely aligned with the concept of agency. Sen defines development as "*one which puts human agency (rather than organisations such as markets or governments) at the centre of the stage*" (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 6). Sen envisions people as willing to shape their fate instead of being passive recipients of development programs (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). In contrast, a non-agent is someone who might be "*alienated in their behaviour, coerced or forced into a situation, oppressed, or simply passive*" (Pelenc, Bazile and Ceruti, 2015, p. 227). Thus, it can be said that in Sen's conception of agency, people are in the driving seat of their destiny (Alkire, 2008). Sen (1992) distinguishes between realised agency success, where goals are achieved through external support, and instrumental agency success, where individuals are the primary agents of their achievements. When people are unable to exercise their agency in any context, it signals the lack of human development, and thus, empowerment is needed (Pelenc et al., 2015). Empowerment within CA literature has been defined in terms of the 'improvement of agency' (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Sen powerfully places agency as the means and ends of development (Sen, 1999). Agency, to wit, is at the heart of any development initiative.

Despite the powerful role of agency within the Capability Approach, it has often been understood and applied primarily as an individual's freedom to choose among alternative functionings (Crocker, 2008; Garza-Vázquez, 2022). Crocker and Robeyns (2009, p. 80) argue that Sen has under-theorised the concept of agency in the CA, as compared to other elements of the theory, such as capabilities and functionings. Individuals within CA are seen as agents in terms of their ability to choose and to transform capabilities into functionings (Frediani, 2010; Garcés, 2020). However, the conceptualisation of the agent only in terms of goal-orientation overlooks the expression of agency in responding to day-to-day life challenges and navigating hurdles that do not necessarily align with predetermined goals. Crocker (2008) argues that agency in CA is overly conceptualised in terms of an individual’s capacity to achieve goals and their freedom to act. It is also claimed that this overemphasis has led to a weak engagement of agency with broader social and power structures (Garza-Vázquez, 2022; Shariff, 2018). This has been the reason that the agency–structure relationship has remained a blind spot within the Capability Approach (Leßmann, 2022). This limited development of the agency–structure relationship within CA has also undermined the process of social transformation within the CA-informed literature (Leßmann, 2022), which requires a recursive link between agency and structure (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). This element has been missing in Sen and other prominent capability theorists (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007; Sen, 1985), who examine agency only on a conception of the good and as actions based on reflective judgment of valued activities. Despite Sen’s (1999, p. 18) emphasis on the process aspect of agency – *“the ability of the people to help themselves and to influence the world”* – much of the Capability Approach literature remains focused on the choice aspect of agency (Garza-Vázquez, 2022). Most of the prominent frameworks (such as Robeyns, 2005) indicate how agency – and the choice aspect of agency – is influenced by the social context. However, there seems to be limited or no literature on how human agency also brings about changes in the social context to widen freedom (Leßmann, 2022).

Consequently, there is limited literature on the mechanisms of the process aspect of agency (Davis, 2015; Garza-Vázquez, 2022). This highlights the need to enrich the Capability Approach’s concept of agency with conceptual tools from the broader social science literature.

Agency in the social sciences is understood as part of the process of social action and social transformation (Archer, 1995; Giddens, 1984). An agent’s ‘ability to act’ is manifested in relation to social change or the agent’s resistance to social inertia (Rebughini, 2023). Agents’ actions are embedded in cultural and material environments and can never be separated from social relations, practices, know-how, limitations, and justifications (Bourdieu, 1977). An agent is aware of the logic of their action through assessment of their constraints and opportunities in a particular social situation, termed as 'reflexive awareness' (Giddens, 1991), 'internal conversation' (Archer, 1995), and the 'practical-evaluative element' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). The literature suggests that action – 'how to do something' – often exists in the form of embodied knowledge or established social practices (Bourdieu, 1977). However, whether individuals reproduce these practices or modify them depends on their reflexive engagement – through moments of epiphanies (Denzin, 2013) – within their social context (Giddens, 1991). The debate over whether agentic practices are merely reproductions of existing rules and routines, or creative practices, has been the main point of difference between the works of Bourdieu and Giddens. Bourdieu (1977) believes that social constraints are reproduced through the application of learned past practices. In contrast, Giddens’ (1984) work is more anchored in the idea that agentic practices contribute to structuration through humans’ capacity to reflect on their experiences.

The socially detached conception of agency within the Capability Approach has also undermined the agency–structure relationship in its evolving literature, even though this relationship has been a central theme in social science literature (Archer, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). Bourdieu (1977) developed this relationship through the concepts of 'habitus' and 'fields'. Social structures, in Bourdieu's work, are internalised through habitus, which is a set of dispositions that enables all thoughts, actions, and perceptions. However, Bourdieu has been accused of leaving too little room for agency and of adopting a constructivist structuralist stance (Sewell, 1992). Giddens (1979, 1984, 1991) sets out an innovative link between agency and structure, where they are not distinct; instead, they are two parts of a system. Giddens (1984) terms the interacting relationship between agency and structure as the 'duality of structure', where agency and structure presuppose each other. As Giddens states, "*social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution*" (1976, p. 21). Giddens powerfully rejected all structuralist and post-structuralist accounts by emphasising that "*structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity*" (Giddens, 1984, p. 26). He did not hesitate to applaud human agency, emphasising that its true potential lies in tackling the structures (Giddens, 1979, pp. 88–94). Giddens proposes that structures are generally stable until agents change them through their actions (Lamsal, 2012). Thus, agency is the fundamental aspect of change in structuration theory, driven by decisions to change either consciously or unconsciously (Elliott, 2020; Lamsal, 2012). However, Giddens's structuration theory has also attracted significant critiques for its conceptual ambiguity. Archer (1995) charges that it conflates structure and agency into a singular process, thereby obscuring the separate causal effects of each. Yet, despite such concerns, Giddens's emphasis on the generative and transformative role of human action remains a valuable contribution for understanding how social change is enacted from within existing structures.

Sen, too, has acknowledged the interplay between agency and structure. He emphasises that social arrangements deeply influence individual freedom and that there is a reciprocal relationship between agency and social mechanisms (Sen, 1999, 2009). As he notes, "*there is a deep complementarity between individual agency and social arrangements. It is important to give simultaneous recognition to the centrality of individual freedom and to the force of social influences on the extent and reach of individual freedom*" (Sen, 1999, xii). He further argues that "*individual freedom is essentially a social product, and there is a two-way relationship between (1) social mechanisms to expand individual freedoms and (2) the use of individual freedoms not only to enhance their respective lives but also to make social mechanisms better and more effective*" (Sen, 2009, p. 49). However, despite these insights, the Capability Approach has yet to develop a fully articulated account of how agency and structure interact. As noted by scholars such as Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) and Leßmann (2022), this remains an under-theorised dimension within the CA literature. Leßmann (2022) contends that just as social structures enable or constrain agency in social action theories (Archer, 1995; Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984), the capabilities and functionings of Sen's agent are similarly subject to the conversion process within a social context. Therefore, capabilities are not only the freedoms available to an individual but also the 'actual power' to achieve what they value in life

(Gangas, 2016, p. 24). However, the CA framework lacks the integration of the social processes that produce or reproduce those capabilities (De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado, 2024). Ibrahim (2006) argues that the CA has remained focused on how social context can impact agency, but fails to establish how agency can also influence the social context in widening freedom (Leßmann, 2022). This missing element is evident in CA's established frameworks – most prominently Robeyns (2005) – which provide only a one-directional account in which social structures impact agency, and not vice versa. Leßmann (2022) expands this debate and asserts that the impact of agency in reproducing or altering structures should be seen through the resultant functionings and the future capability set of an agent within a social context. De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado (2024) also raise concerns that while the CA allows for the influence of social forces on individual freedoms, it fails to include the recursive interrelationship between people and social structures in the reproduction of society. They emphasise the need to prioritise the mechanisms involved in the production or reproduction processes of society to assess the struggles of people that shape the institutional contexts which provide freedom for the pursuit of their desired aspirations (De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado, 2024).

Addressing these critiques, the study integrates the agency–structure relationship into the Capability Approach by drawing on contributions from social sciences (particularly Giddens' structuration notion). These propositions have previously been made theoretically by Ballet, Biggeri and Comim (2011), Biggeri and Ferrannini (2014) and Trani et al. (2011) within the disability and capability context; however, their empirical application has been lacking. Building on these propositions, this study adopts a recursive relationship between social structures and agency within the Capability Approach framework. This position is also supported by recent calls from capability theorists (Bazzani, 2023; De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado, 2024; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Ibrahim, 2017; Leßmann, 2022), and the present study contributes by exploring this relationship through empirical analysis.

Another limitation of agency within the Capability Approach is highlighted in the case of marginalised situations, as the CA calls for 'deliberate and public reasoning' to choose capabilities (Garza-Vázquez, 2022). In such contexts, the very capability to engage in deliberation – to express aspirations, challenge dominant narratives, or influence decisions – is itself unequally distributed. As a result, the process risks reinforcing existing exclusions rather than expanding agency and choice. To address this flaw, Rowlands' (1997) typology of power has been widely adopted by capability scholars to enrich the conceptualisation of agency in such contexts. However, Cindi Katz (2001) offers a more nuanced *triadic framework* for understanding agency under structural constraint, distinguishing between resilience, reworking, and resistance – fluid and interrelated categories. In her framework, resilience refers to the everyday practices through which individuals and communities survive, persist, and adapt to adverse conditions without necessarily challenging the structures that produce them. Reworking involves modifying existing social relations to improve conditions through negotiation or adaptation. In contrast, resistance entails direct and intentional efforts to transform dominant power structures. Katz maintains that "*resistance draws upon 'oppositional consciousness' and aims to bring about 'emancipatory change* " (cited in Hughes, Murrey, Krishnan et al., 2022, p. 2). This framework is particularly valuable for analysing how marginalised individuals exercise agency within complex socio-political environments where formal deliberation is limited or inaccessible.

The above discussion highlights that agency is not only about making conscious, valued choices – as emphasised in the Capability Approach – but also about navigating routine practices (Bourdieu, 1977), exercising reflexivity (Giddens, 1984), projecting into the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), demonstrating resistance (Katz, 2001), contributing to transformation (Giddens, 1984), and enabling positive change within the community (Sen, 1999). These conceptual tools from the social sciences highlight important dimensions of agency that are less emphasised in the Capability Approach literature. This body of literature prompts critical questions that are less explicitly addressed within the Capability Approach, such as: How do individuals exercise agency when their choices are shaped or even constrained by social structures and marginalised conditions? In what ways does agency manifest through routine practices rather than through deliberate goals? How does agency operate in contexts of marginalisation where open deliberation or public reasoning (Sen, 2009) may not be viable? And how is agency enacted in processes of social transformation, particularly within structurally constrained environments? Incorporating these insights allows for a more nuanced understanding of agency within the Capability Approach and helps address its conceptual limitations.

This discussion also raises a critical question: to what extent can an individual, living within a system of inequalities, exercise agency to transform existing conditions – whether for personal well-being or the well-being of the community? What type of agency is required to enable such transformation (Garza-Vázquez, 2022)? These questions lay the foundation for the next section, which explores the concept of collective agency as a means of addressing structural inequalities and advancing social change.

3.3.4 Collective Agency

Although individual agency is essential, it is not sufficient on its own to destabilise structural inequalities (Kabeer, 2021). ‘Our lives depend on others, and others' lives depend on us’ (Garza-Vázquez, 2022). This powerful observation illuminates the innately relational nature of human agency and the importance of collective action, particularly in contexts of inequality. However, the inherent abstractness of the CA and its methodological individualism have kept it disconnected from aspects of ‘collectivity’. As a result, the CA has been criticised for neglecting this collective dimension and focusing exclusively on the individual and their capabilities (Stewart and Deneulin, 2002). Evans (2002) was the first to criticise the notion of ‘individual capabilities’ in Sen’s work and stressed the importance of ‘collective capabilities’ achieved via ‘collective action’. Evans (2002) argued that the freedom to achieve what an individual values is nearly impossible in an individual capacity – particularly for less affluent groups – where collective action appears to be the only pathway to achieving the life they value. Deneulin (2008) also questions the capacity of an ‘autonomous agent’. This is further supported by Alkire (2008, p. 4), who states that in certain situations, an agent’s effective power cannot be achieved alone; instead, collective power is required. Ibrahim (2006) contributes to this debate and proposes the significance of collective capabilities to benefit all within a ‘collectivity’. In this context, Foster and Handy (2008) propose the notion of ‘external capability’, which one person enjoys as a result of the capabilities or actions of others. These socially embedded and relational capabilities highlight that individual well-being can be enhanced not only through personal means but also through the capabilities of those around them.

Sen (2002) acknowledges the importance of public reasoning and democratic processes, but he does not elaborate on them in detail. His work in India applauds the power of collective action (Drèze and Sen, 2002), yet he still hesitates to recognise the notion of 'collective capabilities' (Ibrahim, 2006; Leßmann, 2022) and advises that such capabilities resulting from collective action should remain socially dependent capabilities (Sen, 2002). Therefore, this issue has been consistently flagged and needs to be incorporated into the CA literature (Ibrahim, 2006; Leßmann, 2022; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002). Recent developments in capability literature have accommodated this urgent need, despite Sen's reservations, and have expanded the concept of agency to include collective agency and the increased freedom that comes with it (Pelenc et al., 2015).

Collective agency is a significant notion in many ways. Stewart and Deneulin (2002) emphasise that *"individual agency brought about a change […] not only by individuals acting alone, but by collective action, both formal and informal"* (pp. 16–17). Ibrahim (2006) quoted Fukuda-Parr (2003) to establish the importance of collective agency in this regard: *"collective action is an important force that can pressure changes in policies and bring about political change"* (Fukuda-Parr, 2003, p. 309, cited in Ibrahim, 2006, p. 403). Tiwari (2017) contends that shared situations of injustice, solidarity, common cause, and faith in collective wisdom are among the many key drivers behind collective agency. Ibrahim (2006), through her empirical work in Egypt, demonstrated how poor people, through self-help groups, elevated their conditions and well-being. In other empirical work, she established the relationship between collective agency and social change through the example of women in rural Egypt who collectively abolished the custom of female genital mutilation (Ibrahim, 2014). Pelenc et al. (2015), through participatory action research, produced evidence to understand the mechanisms behind the emergence of collective agency. They indicated that the convergence of individual values and interests – self-goals and social goals – through discussion and interaction leads to the achievement of common goals through collective action. Rauschmayer, Polzin, Mock et al. (2018) examined the direct and indirect impacts of collective agency on group members and asserted that belonging to a collective group can alter an individual's perception of what is within or beyond their control. Ibrahim (2006, 2017) and Garza-Vázquez (2022) strongly believe that collective agency appears to be the only resolve available to people in oppressed, marginalised, and unequal social contexts who face numerous challenges – such as unequal power dynamics, gender norms, unresponsive institutional structures, corruption, ineffective legal systems, and inadequate government services – that restrict their ability to reach their full potential. Thus, collective agency is not only significant for gaining wider freedoms but also for shaping an individual’s perception of the good – particularly for marginalised people, who often suffer from a deficit of aspirations (Garza-Vázquez, 2022). Similarly, Garza-Vázquez (2022) contends that collective agency should be applauded for its ability to achieve common goods (Nebel, Garza-Vázquez and Sedmak, 2022). Elinor Ostrom (1990)’s seminal work suggests that ‘common goods’ are primarily created and governed by the communities. These are goods that are intrinsic to the cooperation of individuals within a community – embedded in the collective organisation that enables the pursuit of social goods and grounded in a shared understanding of their value. This idea has been applied to many Community-Driven Development projects (Nebel et al., 2022). Though Ostrom (1990) idea was based more on tangible goods, Nebel et al. (2022) propose that common goods extend well beyond material resources to include intangible assets such as cultural heritage, knowledge, language, and similar shared values and can be taken as outcome of collective agency (Garza-Vázquez, 2022; Nebel et al., 2022). It can be concluded that collective agency provides a foundation for collective action (Pelenc et al., 2015), social change (Shariff, 2018), and grassroots-level development (Clark et al., 2019; Ibrahim, 2017). Despite a growing body of empirical CA literature in the context of disability, the role of collective agency remains largely unexplored. This study draws on the concept to address this empirical gap and to examine how collective efforts shape the capabilities and aspirations of persons with disabilities.

3.3.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter outlined the key conceptual tools of the Capability Approach, acknowledged its limitations, and enriched its understanding by drawing on insights from broader social science literature. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) forms the overarching theoretical framework guiding this study. It provides the foundational lens through which the aspirations, opportunities, and lived experiences of persons with disabilities in Pakistan are examined. To strengthen its treatment of institutional and structural contexts, Scott's (2013) three-pillar institutional framework – regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive pillars – is integrated to deepen the analysis of conversion factors, particularly in light of critiques that the Capability Approach under-develops the role of institutional structures. This enables a more nuanced understanding of how structural and contextual conditions shape individuals' capability sets. In addition, to address critiques that the Capability Approach under-theorises agency, the study draws on Cindi Katz's (2001) triad of agency – resilience, reworking, and resistance – and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. These perspectives enrich the conceptualisation of agency by illustrating how individuals navigate and contest structural constraints. Together, these complementary frameworks form a coherent theoretical hierarchy, with the Capability Approach at the centre and the additional frameworks positioned as analytic extensions to clarify how structures and agency interact to shape capabilities in the Pakistani disability context.

Building on the above discussion, this study proposes the Capability Approach as an overarching framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between structural constraints and the agency of persons with disabilities in shaping their capabilities. In line with this perspective, the study incorporates the following conceptual research question.

How can empirical insights into the aspirations and lived experiences of persons with disabilities inform and extend the theoretical application of the Capability Approach in disability research?

Chapter Four: Methodology and Methods

4.1 Introduction

The literature review chapter examined how disability is conceptualised across different schools of thought. It also highlighted the dominance of mainstream Western frameworks in guiding the international disability agenda. This underscores the need to explore disability as a complex and context-dependent phenomenon, particularly in cultural settings where social realities differ significantly from Western lived experiences. The theoretical framework chapter then outlined the rationale for employing the Capability Approach to understand the aspirations and agency of persons with disabilities, with particular attention to the role of contextual factors in shaping the achievement of those aspirations. Together, these conceptual foundations inform the choice of methodology adopted in this study.

This study adopts a qualitative design (Creswell and Poth, 2018) informed by a critical realist philosophical framework (Bhaskar, 1975; Fletcher, 2017). Primary data were collected from persons with disabilities and key disability stakeholders. To support and contextualise this data collection, relevant grey literature – including policy reports and legislative documents – was consulted to inform both the research design and the development of interview guides. A combination of narrative and semi-structured interviews was used to generate rich, detailed data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns within the data. The chapter begins by discussing the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the study, followed by a rationale for the chosen qualitative research approach. It then outlines the research design, including sampling strategy, data collection methods and data analysis techniques. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations and a reflexive account of the research process.

4.2 Research Philosophy

The philosophical position of a researcher can influence the nature of their research work. A clear understanding of the nature of social reality (ontology) and the appropriate form of knowledge (epistemology) to access that reality helps to enhance the clarity and validity of the research (Bell, Harley and Bryman, 2022; Creswell and Creswell, 2017).

Positivist ontology assumes that a single, objective reality exists independently of human perception and that "*an objective truth can be discovered*" (Moon, Blackman, Adams et al., 2019, p. 296). Accordingly, the epistemological approach under positivism follows scientific methods of inquiry, emphasising objectivity and measurement. In contrast, constructivism holds that reality is subjective and denies the existence of any universal truth (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim et al., 2014). Moon et al. (2019) highlight the crux of constructivism: "*conflicting versions of reality can exist simultaneously and can be shared within, or move chaotically through, social groups*" (p. 296). Constructivism adopts interpretive approaches (Creswell and Creswell, 2017) that focus on understanding subjective experiences and socially constructed meanings. Positivism has been criticised for assuming a single, measurable reality, which negates the subjective experiences of human beings (Aliyu et al., 2014). In contrast, constructivism has been criticised for denying the existence of an objective reality and reducing it to mere interpretations (Ton et al., 2021). Fletcher (2017) highlights that, although positivism and constructivism may appear contradictory, both paradigms ultimately reduce reality to what can be known through human understanding. Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) assert that reality should not be reduced to human knowledge, whether to test it empirically or to construct it socially. To address this dilemma, Critical Realist (CR) philosophy was introduced (Bhaskar, 1975). Bhaskar (1975) distinguishes between two aspects of a phenomenon: the intransitive (ontological) and the transitive (epistemological). The intransitive refers to what exists independently of our observation, while the transitive comprises the cognitive devices through which we understand that reality, such as concepts, models, and theories. Albert, Brundage, Sweet et al. (2020) contend that CR holds ontology (reality) to be independent of epistemology (our understanding of reality). Bhaskar (2014) termed this the ‘epistemic fallacy’ when criticising the limitations of both positivist and constructivist paradigms, which reduce reality to human knowledge. Critical realism challenges this reductionism by positing that reality consists of multiple levels that are not merely reducible to human understanding. It maintains the stance that while there may be different perspectives on reality, this does not imply the existence of multiple realities. As Fleetwood (2005) argues, through critical realism, we acknowledge the imperfection of our knowledge and the possibility of being wrong. Critical realist epistemology recognises that social activities and discourses shape knowledge, and that interpretive processes play an essential role in making sense of reality (Ton et al., 2021). More accurately, differing opinions may reflect different aspects of the same underlying reality (Ton et al., 2021), helping to reveal the multiple layers of reality shaped by diverse logics and understandings (Fletcher, 2017).

Following the discussion of major philosophical traditions in research, the next section presents the rationale for selecting critical realism as the guiding philosophical paradigm for this study.

4.2.1 Critical Realism as a chosen philosophical paradigm

Disability, as discussed in earlier chapters, is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that has been inconsistently conceptualised across different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Shakespeare and Watson (2021) observe that researchers often select research paradigms that align with their preferred models of disability, which in turn shape their methodological choices and influence research outcomes (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). For instance, Oliver (1992) observes that the individual (medical) model of disability is associated with positivism, whereas the social model is more commonly linked to constructivist or interpretivist paradigms. Similarly, the pre-determined and instrumental nature of the ICF model aligns it more closely with a positivist framework (Ton et al., 2021).

In the Capability Approach literature, a similar pattern emerges. Most empirical applications – particularly those using quantitative methods – are embedded within a positivist paradigm (Mitra, 2018; Trani and Bakhshi, 2008). A key limitation of this approach is its failure to account for the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments. As Fleetwood (2014) argues, positivism ignores the interplay between social structures and human agency. Moreover, capabilities cannot be understood in predictable or static ways (Ton et al., 2021), as the social world operates as an open system marked by complexity (Fleetwood, 2014). Capturing the lived reality of capabilities, therefore, requires deeper qualitative engagement rather than surface-level empirical observation (Ton et al., 2021). In response, some researchers have turned to constructivist paradigms and qualitative methods to explore capabilities (Ibrahim and Tiwari, 2014). While this approach allows for more nuanced engagement with individual meaning-making, it has been criticised for denying the existence of an objective social reality and reducing social phenomena to personal interpretations (Fleetwood, 2014). While positivist and constructivist paradigms offer valuable insights, they remain inadequate for fully capturing how disability and impairment are woven into people’s everyday lives and the strategies developed to navigate these experiences. As Watson (2019) argues, these paradigms fall short in uncovering the deeper structures and causal mechanisms that shape the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. The limitations of these two dominant paradigms have underscored the growing significance of critical realism in disability studies (Shakespeare and Watson, 2021; Watson, 2019).

Critical realism is based on a stratified ontology that distinguishes between three layers of reality: the empirical, the actual, and the real (Bhaskar, 1975). The empirical refers to what can be experienced or observed. The actual includes all events that occur, whether observed or not. The real consists of the underlying structures and mechanisms that generate these events. These mechanisms may not be directly observable but have causal power. In this way, critical realism recognises human agency, social structures, and their associated causal mechanisms as central to understanding social phenomena (Fleetwood, 2014). Social phenomena are thus seen as layered, emergent, and influenced by both structure and agency (McEvoy and Richards, 2006). Bhaskar and Danermark (2006) highlight that critical realism recognises a wide range of entities – including material objects, social practices, legislation, discourses, emotions, and experiences – particularly when they exert causal effects. Within the disability context, the empirical domain refers to the observable aspects of daily life and interactions within families, communities, and society. These experiences are shaped by the actual domain, where social events such as prejudice, discrimination, and inequality occur, regardless of whether individuals directly perceive them. Underpinning this is the real domain, which comprises the deeper cultural, religious, and political structures and mechanisms that generate and sustain such events. In this way, critical realism provides a robust philosophical foundation for the study (Watson, 2019).

While the Capability Approach has been widely used in disability research, its engagement with a critical realist perspective remains limited (Ton et al., 2021). In the critical realist framework, capabilities are not merely observable outcomes but are embedded in complex social structures, shaped by historical, institutional, and cultural mechanisms (Ton et al., 2021). Nonetheless, critical realism offers a promising foundation for understanding the aspirations of persons with disabilities and the complex interplay between agency and structure in shaping their capabilities. This perspective is well captured by Craig and Bigby (2015, p. 311), who note that critical realism "*sees human beings as active in constructing their own world, while also constrained and shaped by structures that have real effects*."

In this study, a qualitative methodology informed by critical realism is adopted to explore the underlying structures and lived experiences that shape the capabilities and aspirations of persons with disabilities in the study context. Critical realism offers the flexibility to choose methods that are most appropriate for the research aims and is not confined to a single methodological tradition, unlike positivism and constructivism (Fletcher, 2017; McEvoy and Richards, 2006). Building on this, the following section offers a rationale for positioning this research within a particular research design.

4.3 Research Design and Methods

This section outlines the overall research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods and processes, and data analysis techniques used in this study. The following subsections detail the rationale and procedures underpinning this design.

4.3.1 Qualitative Exploratory Research Design

This study aimed to establish a holistic understanding of the aspirations of PWDs and the role of contextual factors as enablers or constraints in achieving those aspirations. Mason (2002) emphasises that qualitative research enables researchers to explore social phenomena from multiple dimensions, enhancing the understanding of how institutions, relationships, and processes influence how actors make sense of everyday life. These perspectives resonate with the goals of this study, particularly in light of the multifaceted social and structural barriers affecting the lives of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry and the limited research available on the lived experiences of PWDs in the Pakistani context, a qualitative exploratory research design was adopted (Stebbins, 2001). Stebbins (2001) defines exploratory research as a flexible approach suitable for investigating poorly understood social phenomena. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe this approach as especially suitable when little is known about a phenomenon or when established theories or categories may not capture participants' meanings, leading researchers to prefer open-ended and inductive methods. In line with the integrated framework of critical realism and the capability approach, this design facilitates the exploration of both the lived experiences of PWDs and the underlying structures that shape them. As the fieldwork progressed, several new themes emerged that held strong significance for the participants. These themes not only influenced the initial research questions but also prompted a recursive engagement with the literature, theoretical framework, and contextual descriptions, leading to their refinement within the thesis. This iterative process aligns with the qualitative research tradition (Creswell and Poth, 2018), in which data collection and analysis are not strictly linear but evolve in response to the depth and direction of participant narratives. In this way, the research design remained open and responsive, allowing empirical data to inform and shape the conceptual framing.

4.3.2 Participant Selection and Recruitment Strategy

Literature suggests that disability research – particularly in the Global South – has often failed to meaningfully incorporate the perspectives of persons with disabilities, frequently treating them as passive subjects rather than as active participants in the research process (Kuper, Hameed, Reichenberger et al., 2021). Walmsley (2001) introduces the notion of 'inclusive research' to emphasise the involvement of persons with disabilities in research as more than just respondents. Similarly, Bigby, Frawley, and Ramcharan (2014) argue that research concerning disability should meaningfully include disabled individuals, particularly when it addresses issues that directly impact their lives. In the same vein, Oliver (1992) contends that the epistemology of disability research must be grounded in the lived experiences of disabled people, emphasising their role as knowledge producers rather than merely subjects of inquiry. Reflecting these inclusive and participatory principles (Corcuff, Jribi, Rodrigue et al., 2025), this study is intentionally designed to centre the views and lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Disability literature also highlights the lack of an intersectional perspective in disability research (Goodley, 2017), as persons with disabilities are often assumed to share similar experiences and views regardless of gender, age, or socio-economic background (Goethals, De Schauwer and Van Hove, 2015). To address this gap, the study aimed to recruit participants with disabilities from varied demographic and regional backgrounds across all provinces of the study context.

Two participant groups were selected to operationalise the research: persons with disabilities and relevant disability stakeholders. In this study, disability stakeholders refer to individuals without disabilities who work in roles related to disability. These two groups were chosen to capture both the lived experiences and structural or institutional perspectives pertinent to the study's aims. The primary data for this study were the personal narratives of persons with disabilities, which formed the core empirical basis for analysing aspirations and agency. To contextualise these narratives, stakeholder interviews were also conducted with NGO representatives, educators, employers, government officials, human rights lawyers and disability-sector practitioners. The stakeholder accounts served to provide broader contextualisation of the structural, institutional, and cultural environments within which disabled people form and pursue their aspirations.

The decision to include stakeholder interviews directly aligned with the study’s second research objective: to examine the social and institutional factors that shape capability formation. While the first objective was intentionally centred on the lived experiences and voices of persons with disabilities – reflecting participants’ own emphasis that their aspirations should not be spoken for by others – understanding the wider regulative, normative, and cultural–cognitive structures required insights from those positioned within these systems. Stakeholder interviews therefore complemented, rather than replaced, the personal narratives by illuminating policy practices, organisational behaviours, and institutional constraints that were not always visible from the perspective of individual participants. In this way, the stakeholder data enriched and strengthened the analysis of contextual and institutional factors.

Participants with disabilities were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: being adults who self-identified as having a disability and possessing lived experience relevant to the study’s initial focus – namely, employment/work aspirations. This led to the exclusion of individuals with cognitive disabilities, as they were generally not engaged in formal or informal employment at the time of data collection. This decision was further reinforced to ensure alignment between participants’ experiences and the emerging aims of the study.

Initial contact with persons with disabilities was established through **NOWPDP**, a prominent disability-focused organisation in Pakistan that facilitates employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for PWDs. This organisation assisted in identifying initial participants for pilot interviews and also connected the researcher with relevant disability stakeholders. In doing so, this study adopted a non-probability sampling strategy in line with qualitative research norms

(Saunders and Townsend, 2018). Specifically, purposive sampling was employed to identify participants whose characteristics were intentionally selected based on their relevance to the study's aims (Andrade, 2021). This technique is widely supported in the literature as appropriate for research involving vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations (Valerio, Rodriguez, Winkler et al., 2016). In this study, persons with disabilities were first recruited through purposive sampling (Thomas, 2022), and these initial participants subsequently referred other eligible individuals, enabling the use of snowball sampling to expand the sample (Noy, 2008).

4.3.2.1 Strengths and Limitations of Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy reflected several strengths in relation to the study's focus on work and employment. Participants with disabilities were purposively selected on the basis that they were either currently in work, had prior work experience, or were actively seeking employment, ensuring strong alignment with the study's emphasis on employment aspirations and workplace experiences. The sample included both men and women, allowing exploration of gendered nuances in work-related capabilities. All participants identified as Muslim, which is consistent with Pakistan's demographic composition and the dynamics of snowball sampling, where recruitment through existing networks tends to reproduce majority-group characteristics. Although not intentionally sought, this homogeneity in religious identity reflects the predominant socio-cultural context in which disability and work experiences unfold in Pakistan. Including both persons with disabilities and disability-sector stakeholders further strengthened the depth and breadth of perspectives captured, enabling a more multi-layered understanding of the institutional and contextual factors shaping work-related capabilities. Collectively, these inclusion characteristics strengthened the relevance, depth, and contextual coherence of the sample in addressing the study’s employment-focused objectives.

However, the sampling approach also had limitations, most notably the exclusion of persons with cognitive or severe intellectual disabilities. In the Pakistani context, such individuals are widely perceived as “unemployable” and are therefore often absent from formal and informal labour markets; as a result, they were not referred by gatekeepers or disability organisations during recruitment. Their participation would also have required adapted methodological tools and enhanced ethical safeguards that were beyond the scope of this study. While the resulting sample is appropriate for examining the employment-related aspirations and broader life experiences of those positioned as potential labour market participants, it does not capture the distinct realities of persons with cognitive disabilities.

In addition, while the absence of non-Muslim participants mirrors Pakistan’s broader demographic composition – where approximately 96% of the population is Muslim – it also illustrates a practical limitation of network-based recruitment in contexts where minority groups may have lower visibility within the specific disability networks through which participants were accessed. Nevertheless, the sample remains well-suited to the aims of this study, as it captures the experiences of individuals who represent the overwhelming majority of Pakistan’s disability population and reflects the socio-religious context within which employment and capability formation predominantly occur.

4.3.3 Data Source Triangulation

In this study, data were gathered from two distinct participant categories: persons with disabilities and stakeholders relevant to disability. This approach reflects the use of data source triangulation, a strategy recognised in qualitative research for enhancing the depth and validity of findings (Kern, 2018). More broadly, triangulation involves examining the same concept, event, or variable by integrating multiple perspectives or angles (Kern, 2018). Among the categories of triangulation identified by Denzin (1978), this study employed data source triangulation, which involves collecting data from different types of people to capture diverse perspectives on the research problem. By integrating the perspectives of PWDs, who experience the realities of disability first-hand, with those of stakeholders, who influence or implement relevant policies, services, and practices, the research was able to develop a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the aspirations of PWDs and the contextual factors shaping them.

4.3.4 Data Collection Methods

As discussed earlier, the initial aim of this study was to explore what persons with disabilities aspire to in relation to their working lives, and the contextual factors that constrain or enable those aspirations. To operationalise this inquiry, semi-structured interviews (Bell et al., 2022) were employed. Semi-structured interviews encourage participants to express their values, beliefs, and experiences in their own terms. The choice of this approach aligns with my ‘subjectivist epistemology’, which treats people’s accounts as meaningful expressions of their social reality (Mason, 2002).

An initial set of loosely structured interview questions was developed based on both academic and grey literature (Dearnley, 2005) and was adapted after the pilot interviews, which began in February 2023. The pilot interviews revealed that participants offered far richer narratives than anticipated, which led to the adoption of a more open, narrative-style interview approach in subsequent interviews with persons with disabilities (Appendix-2). Also, it broadened the scope of the research, prompting a refinement of the initial research questions. Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016, p. 5) explain that "*the narrative approach places the people being studied at the heart of the study process and privileges the meanings that they assign to their own stories*." As the pilot interviews generated relevant and meaningful data, they were incorporated into the main sample and subsequently included in the thematic analysis.

Drawing on the insights gained from participants with disabilities, a semi-structured interview guide was then developed for disability stakeholders (Appendix-3) to understand their perspectives on disability rights, policy, and support systems.

4.3.4.1 Data Collection Process and Fieldwork Challenges

Data collection was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, I interviewed PWDs, and in the second phase, I interviewed disability stakeholders. The data collection period took longer than expected, spanning from February to December 2023, due to political instability in Pakistan following the ousting of the then Prime Minister by the military establishment. I initially travelled to Pakistan intending to conduct in-person interviews. However, I was only able to conduct a few interviews before widespread political protests and civil unrest made fieldwork unsafe. This initiated a methodological shift from in-person interviews to online interviews conducted via Zoom. This shift also posed additional challenges, particularly regarding digital accessibility for some participants with disabilities. In some cases, with participants' permission, my family members based in Pakistan facilitated the interviews by transporting a laptop and portable internet device to the interview location. These difficulties were compounded by internet blackouts imposed by the government during periods of protest, leading to the cancellation and rescheduling of many interviews multiple times. Accessibility accommodations were made where necessary. Special accommodations were made for participants with hearing and speech impairments, including the use of a qualified interpreter. Ethical considerations were strictly ensured, particularly in interpreter-mediated interviews.

All interviews were conducted in Urdu, the shared language of the researcher and participants. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into English. A total of 32 interviews were conducted with persons with disabilities (Appendix-4), exploring their aspirations and the barriers they face in everyday life. A total of 13 interviews were conducted with disability stakeholders (Appendix-5), which provided additional insights into the implementation gaps between policy and practice, institutional barriers to inclusion, and the challenges service providers face in supporting the aspirations of persons with disabilities. This study received ethical approval from the University of Essex Research Ethics Committee (Appendix-6). Ethical access was negotiated through informed consent (Appendix-7), and voluntary participation was ensured throughout (Appendix-8).

A total of 45 interviews were conducted as part of this study. In qualitative research, sample size is guided by the concept of thematic saturation rather than statistical representation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006). Since the personal narratives of persons with disabilities formed the core empirical basis of the study, data collection for this group continued until thematic saturation was reached. This ensured that the key patterns, variations, and lived experiences relevant to the research questions were fully captured. In contrast, the sampling of disability stakeholders followed a more pragmatic logic, aimed at securing a diverse and informative range of perspectives across NGOs, employers, educators, government actors, and sector specialists. The purpose of including stakeholders was contextual; therefore, the sample size reflected a balance between depth, diversity, and feasibility, which is typical and appropriate for doctoral-level qualitative research. In short, while the PWD sample was guided by saturation principles, the stakeholder sample was shaped by pragmatic considerations to ensure adequate representation of the broader institutional environment.

4.3.5 Presenting the Findings: Stories and Themes

In this section, I outline the structure through which the findings of this study will be presented. First, I provide an overview of the broader socio-political context of Pakistan to situate the analysis and set the stage for interpreting participants' experiences. This is followed by four contextual and illustrative stories drawn from the narratives of persons with disabilities. The subsequent three chapters present the thematic analysis, offering a systematic exploration of the key patterns and insights emerging from the data. This approach aligns with narrative traditions in qualitative research (Riessman, 2008), allowing for the co-presence of story and analysis in the thesis.

4.3.5.1 Presenting Contextual Stories

I chose to present these narrative stories at the outset of the empirical analysis. These stories serve a contextual and illustrative role, offering readers an insight into the lived realities of participants prior to the formal thematic engagement. While these narrative stories are drawn directly from the empirical data – including verbatim participant quotes – they are not subjected to formal thematic coding. Instead, they serve as complementary, illustrative accounts that bring depth and coherence to the experiential dimensions of disability, work, and aspiration. These narratives are woven into the discussion chapter to illuminate and contextualise key thematic insights.

These stories are constructed as narrative vignettes that foreground the struggles, aspirations, and journeys of participants in their own voices. These narratives help to create a connection between the reader and the participants, anchoring the analysis that follows in the everyday real lives of PWDs in Pakistan. The stories are lightly crafted for flow, but they retain the voice, emotion, and meaning conveyed by participants. Direct quotations are embedded to preserve authenticity. After multiple readings of the interview transcripts, I identified four individuals whose life trajectories reflected different outcomes for PWDs. These individuals were selected to illustrate the diversity and complexity of PWD’s life experiences, providing a foundation for the subsequent analysis. I reconstructed these narratives using the broader codes that emerged during the transcription reading stage, shaping them into temporal sequences (Ricoeur, 1980). The concept of temporal order was beneficial in tracing how life events unfolded over time and how participants made sense of their experiences at particular moments and in specific contexts. I paid particular attention to what Ricoeur (1973) calls 'hermeneutical function of distanciation'. In this study, 'distanciation' was achieved by crafting narratives that closely followed each participant's interview. I positioned myself primarily as a story weaver – organising and structuring the stories without altering or interpreting them beyond their intended meaning. While I maintained analytical distance from the narrated events themselves, I acknowledge that complete separation from my own preconceptions was neither possible nor desirable. Instead, my subjectivity, shaped by pre-existing codes in my mind, influenced how I constructed and shaped the story plots.

4.3.5.2 Presenting Analysis Chapters

Drawing on the generated data, I developed three empirical chapters, each firmly grounded in the thematic analysis conducted during the research. In preparation for the analysis stage, I undertook a certified qualitative data analysis course (Appendix-9), which enhanced my ability to code and interpret the data systematically. The empirical chapters present key themes that emerged from participants' narratives, situated within the broader conceptual and contextual framework of the study. The following section outlines the thematic analysis and coding process in detail, explaining how the themes were constructed from the data.

4.3.6 Thematic Analysis and Coding Process

Thematic analysis is a widely used method to identify, analyse and interpret recurring patterns of meaning – commonly referred to as themes – within qualitative data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis was particularly suited to this study due to its flexibility and its compatibility with a critical realist ontology and the Capability Approach framework. In this study, thematic analysis was conducted using a hybrid of deductive and inductive coding. Initially, I developed two broad thematic categories – aspirations and conversion factors – based on the theoretical lens of the Capability Approach. Within these pre-determined categories, I allowed subthemes to emerge inductively from the data.

4.3.6.1 Coding Process

Following Clarke and Braun's (2017) six-phase model of thematic analysis, I began by familiarising myself with the data through repeated readings of interview transcripts. I then manually generated initial codes using Microsoft Excel, assigning labels to meaningful segments of data. These codes were subsequently organised into subthemes and then grouped into overarching themes under two main analytical categories. I adopted both inductive and deductive approaches in developing themes. Drawing on the literature, theoretical framework, and research questions, I broadly categorised the codes into two overarching domains: *aspirations* and *conversion factors*. Within these categories, I inductively developed codes that reflected participants' lived experiences. I reviewed all themes for coherence and internal consistency, ensuring they meaningfully captured the complexity and richness of the data. To enhance transparency and demonstrate the analytical process, visual snapshots of the coding framework developed in Excel are provided. These visuals offer a clear representation of how the themes related to aspirations (Appendix-10) and conversion factors (Appendix-11) were constructed through a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning.

Thematic analysis also demands reflexivity as the researcher's interpretive lens certainly influences the analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). My positionality as a researcher with personal experience of disability within my family, along with my familiarity with the socio-political context of disability in Pakistan, informed both the coding process and the interpretation of data. For instance, when participants described family support as a significant enabler, my understanding of family's role within the Pakistani context and as a conversion factor in the Capability Approach shaped how I categorised and interpreted that insight.

4.4 Recursive Theory–Data Development

In line with the principles of Critical Realism, this study adopted a recursive and iterative relationship between theory development and data analysis. Rather than applying a fixed theoretical framework from the outset, the analytic process followed a retroductive logic, moving back and forth between empirical accounts and conceptual explanation. Retroduction, as understood within Critical Realism, involves probing beneath participants' narratives to identify the underlying causal mechanisms and structural conditions that shape their experiences (Fletcher, 2017). This required a continuous dialogue between the emerging data and the theoretical tools guiding the study. For example, early interview findings revealed the simultaneous and powerful influence of both agency and structural constraints in shaping the aspirations of persons with disabilities. This insight prompted a refinement of the initial theoretical framework: beyond the Capability Approach, I integrated Katz's triad of agency (2001) and Giddens' structuration (1984) to better capture the dynamic interplay between individual actions and structural forces. Similarly, the prominence of institutional barriers in participants' accounts led to the incorporation of Scott's three-pillar institutional framework (2013) to deepen the analysis of conversion factors. Thus, theory and data developed together through a recursive process, where theoretical refinement emerged from empirical insights, and revised theoretical lenses, in turn, guided subsequent rounds of analysis. This iterative engagement reflects the epistemological commitments of Critical Realism, where theory is not imposed deductively but evolves through sustained movement between abstraction and empirical complexity leading to a flexible deductive approach (Fletcher, 2017).

4.5 Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity and ethical awareness are integral to any qualitative research (Creswell and Poth, 2018). It requires the researcher to critically reflect on their positionality, values, and potential influence on the research process and interpretation of data. Ethical consideration in this study was not only shaped by the sensitivity of working with a historically marginalised group – persons with disabilities – but also by my position as a non-disabled researcher.

In reflecting on my positionality, I recognise that I occupied both an insider and outsider position throughout this research. As a Pakistani researcher, I shared cultural, linguistic, and contextual familiarity with participants, which helped build trust and enabled me to understand the subtle socio-cultural nuances embedded in their narratives. As noted in the Introduction chapter, my personal experience has significantly shaped my sensitivity to the physical, social, and structural barriers faced by PWDs and their caregivers. My experience has profoundly shaped the way I understand disability, instilling in me a strong sense of empathy and responsibility that continues to guide my ethical stance as a researcher. My lived experiences not only shaped my ethical position as a researcher but also informed the way I interpreted participants' narratives, which hermeneutic scholars refer to as the researcher's pre-understanding. Dilthey (1976) argues that to achieve a meaningful understanding of any human experience, whether it's a written text, spoken narrative, artwork, or action, one must also understand the historical, social, and cultural context in which that experience was created. In a similar vein, Heidegger (1962) introduces the idea of the 'forestructure of understanding', emphasising that we do not engage with people, texts, or experiences as neutral observers. Instead, we inevitably approach them with prior assumptions, background knowledge, and culturally embedded experiences. These 'forestructures' shape how we make sense of what we read, hear, or observe. I remain aware that my native position may also introduce certain prejudices – what Gadamer (2004) describes as inevitable and necessary preconditions of all understanding.

However, as a non-disabled researcher, I was simultaneously positioned as an outsider to the lived embodied experience of disability. This dual positionality raised an important ethical and epistemological dilemma concerning power and representation. A longstanding critique within disability research is that non-disabled researchers may inadvertently "speak for" rather than "speak with" persons with disabilities, thereby reproducing paternalistic, managerial, or ableist interpretations of their experiences (Humphrey, 2000). I was mindful of this risk at every stage of the research process.

To mitigate this power imbalance, I adopted an inclusive and dialogical approach that positioned participants as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive subjects. During interviews, participants were encouraged to guide the flow of conversation, raise issues that mattered to them, and determine the extent of detail they wished to share. This participant-led approach not only enabled individuals to raise issues that mattered most to them and determine the depth of their narratives but also led to subtle shifts in the initial scope of the study design. Allowing the research to evolve in response to participants’ priorities reflects my commitment to redistributing power within the research process and ensuring that PWDs’ voices meaningfully shaped the direction of the study.

Additionally, I remained attentive to the emotional labour that sharing personal, and at times difficult, experiences might require. My aim was to cultivate an empathetic, respectful research space where participants’ voices were centred, and their agency acknowledged. This commitment aligns with wider emancipatory disability research principles, which advocate for shared control, transparency, and accountability in representing disabled people’s perspectives (Oliver and Barnes, 2013; Shakespeare, 1996). By making my positionality explicit, I aim to offer readers a transparent account of how being a non-disabled yet culturally insider researcher shaped, enriched, and sometimes challenged my interpretive lens.

Ethically, this study followed the norms of qualitative research involving human participants – namely informed consent, voluntary participation, protection from harm, confidentiality, and anonymity (Bell et al., 2022; Sin, 2018) – all of which align with the UNCRPD's guidelines. To protect participants' confidentiality, all respondents with disabilities were assigned pseudonyms, which are listed in Appendix-4 and used consistently throughout the analysis and discussion chapters.

I also remained mindful that some interview questions – especially those related to life challenges – could trigger emotional distress. As Sin (2018, p. 328) asserts, such moments may be perceived by participants as "*a sign of further marginalisation*." Therefore, I tried to maintain a respectful tone and avoided pressuring participants to share anything they were uncomfortable sharing.

The discussion in this section forms part of my commitment to reflexivity, offering a transparent account of the positionality that informs the interpretive process. It allows readers to make a well-informed judgment about the extent to which the researcher's pre-understanding may both enrich and potentially limit the interpretation of the research data. Reflexivity played a crucial role in managing my ethical accountability. As Reay (1996) and Subramani (2019) argue, reflexivity is not just about recognising the researcher's position but also about navigating the power dynamics embedded in the research process. Acknowledging this, I took care to create a respectful relationship with participants, considering them the co-constructors of the knowledge. In doing so, I committed myself to advancing the inclusive and participatory disability research agenda (Corcuff et al., 2025; Walmsley, 2001) in both spirit and practice.

4.6 Conclusion and Summary

This chapter highlights the philosophical, methodological, and ethical foundations of this thesis. It justifies the use of a qualitative exploratory design grounded in critical realist philosophy. A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was used to access persons with disabilities and disability stakeholders. Data were collected through narrative and semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis enabled both deductive and inductive interpretation of patterns within the data. Ethical considerations and reflexivity remained central to this study at every stage to ensure both ethical rigour and transparency.

Chapter Five: Context and Voices

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out the context and the voices of participants prior to engaging with thematic analysis. This 'laying out the context' is influenced by one of the central concepts of hermeneutics – pre-understanding (Heidegger, 1962). This chapter begins by outlining the broader socio-political conditions that ultimately shape disability experiences in the study context. These contextual insights are critical for interpreting the findings that follow, as they reveal how global disability frameworks often diverge from local realities.

The second half of the chapter presents a series of illustrative and contextual participant stories that bring to life the lived realities of PWDs in Pakistan. These narratives foreground the rich voices of individuals whose experiences reflect the complex interplay between aspirations, systemic barriers, and acts of agency. These accounts offer insights into participants' pursuit of a flourishing and dignified life – insights that underpin the broader themes explored in the chapters that follow.

5.2 Setting the Scene: The Broader Pakistani Context

This section provides an overview of the context of Pakistan within which the experiences and aspirations of PWDs are shaped. It examines the broader cultural, institutional and political structures that influence opportunities for PWDs. Understanding these contextual dynamics is essential for situating the study and interpreting how global discourses on disability intersect with local realities.

5.2.1 Historical and Political Foundations of Structural Inequality in Pakistan

Pakistan, which gained independence from British rule in 1947, is a country marked by an eventful political and social history, a large and demographically diverse population, nuclear capacity, and a strategically significant location – bordering China, India, Iran and Afghanistan. Despite these defining features, it remains underdeveloped nearly seventy-eight years into its sovereignty, with deep-seated structural inequalities shaping the lives of its citizens (Haque, 1991). Throughout its history, Pakistan has largely been governed by a small but powerful coalition of military, feudal, capitalist and bureaucratic elites (Haque, 1991), often operating under the guise of 'so-called democracy' (Bibi, Jameel and Jalal, 2018). The legacy of colonialism remained embedded in the fabric of the country, sustained through the unquestioning subservience of its governing elites to Western powers (Haque, 1991), to maintain the dominance of the indigenous elite coalition (Ahmar, 2016). Through foreign support mechanisms, the local governing elites succeeded in concentrating wealth, resources, power and privileges in their own hands (Haque, 1991). This consolidation resulted in the socio-economic exploitation of the general masses in Pakistan, much like in other developing countries (Ahmar, 2016). Pakistan's intricate socio-economic trajectory is marked by a multitude of unresolved issues, including political instability, weak governance, persistent inflation, widespread poverty, human rights violations, corruption, illiteracy, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure, to name a few (Ahmar, 2016; Van Der Eng, 2025).

5.2.2 The Social Fabric of Pakistan: Intersecting Identities and Structural Hierarchies

Turning to the Pakistani social mosaic, the country represents a highly stratified society shaped by intersecting identities of religion, ethnicity, class, caste and gender. ‘Islam’ is the dominant religion in Pakistan, divided into various sects, with widespread religious intolerance and well-documented violations of religious minority rights (Mehfooz, 2021). Pakistan is home to several major ethnic groups associated with provincial identities, including Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis and Baloch, along with smaller communities such as Saraikis, Gilgit-Baltistanis and Hazaras. Ethnic identity in Pakistan often leads to inter-ethnic tensions due to regional politics and (in)access to resources (Ismail, Mehdi, Ali et al., 2025; Khan, Shaheen and Ahmad, 2019; Mughal, 2020). Class and caste are often used interchangeably as markers of identity and social pride (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2021). The class system is upheld through powerful elite groups, including rural feudal, urban capitalists, military leadership and bureaucratic officers. The remaining are all common people in the form of the middle class or lower class (Haque, 1991). Culturally, Pakistan is a collectivist society where people live interdependently and prioritise group values (Abbas and Wu, 2021). Family and community bonds play a central role in social life, with individual identities deeply rooted in these connections (Latif, 2013). Social connections are central to personal, social and professional life in Pakistan, where a strong sense of community drives individuals to seek support from their networks rather than relying on state institutions (Abbas and Wu, 2021). The joint family system, where extended families live together and care for all members regardless of age or impairment, remains a prevalent tradition in Pakistan (Cassum, Cash, Qidwai et al., 2020). The extended kinship system, in the form of caste affiliations – referred to as *Biradari* in the native language, Urdu – further reinforces a shared sense of responsibility toward those within the same caste (Latif, 2013). Another defining feature of Pakistani society is its patriarchal structure. Patriarchal norms are institutionalised through religious and cultural discourses, which are embedded in notions of family honour tied to female virtue, restrictive social behaviours, gender-specific roles and gender segregation (Ahmad and Anwar, 2018). The institutionalisation and internalisation of patriarchy result in the subjugation of women and their reliance on men across all spheres of life in Pakistani society (Habiba, Ali and Ashfaq, 2016). Traditionally, men remain with and provide for their parents in old age, while women leave their natal homes after marriage to live with and care for their husband's extended family. As a result, sons are regarded as the family's heirs. Therefore, investing in boys' education is often perceived as yielding greater economic returns compared to investing in the education of girls (Gopang, 2024; Tajammal, Arun and Pourmehdi, 2024). However, the impact of patriarchal norms varies across different segments of society and is influenced by levels of literacy, poverty and urbanisation (Syed and Tariq, 2018). Literature further highlights that the patriarchal structure of Pakistani society provides space for gender gaps in all aspects of life, but most prominently in education, employment and the legal sphere (Ahmad and Anwar, 2018). Jokes and crude humour are common social attitudes that play an essential role in the social stereotyping of people belonging to different social identities (Shah, Khattak and Kanwal, 2022). Media representations further reinforce social stereotypes by relying on recurring comedic tropes. These forms of crude humour are even institutionalised in political discourse, where opponents mock each other based on physical traits or lineage (Suleman and Saleem, 2024).

5.2.3 Language, Privilege and Educational Divides in Pakistan

Pakistan's education system comprises multiple and diverse parallel educational streams such as the private, public and religious education systems (Sattar, 2016). Parallel educational streams play a prominent role in maintaining class privilege within an already stratified society (Ullah and Ali, 2018). The medium of instruction (language) tends to play a sharp role in reinforcing class status (Rahman, 2010; Tamim, 2021). Generally, society places significant importance on English speakers owing to its colonial legacy and associates English-speaking with high social status (Rahman, 2010). Private institutions, through paid education, offer English as the medium of instruction. Private educational setup is subcategorised into elite and non-elite institutions based on their facilities and expenses. Elite institutions attract influential families from the country's powerful elite groups. Non-elite institutions are among the most preferred choices of middle- and working-class families who aspire to secure better career prospects for their children. By contrast, public institutions – being state-funded – offer the national language as the medium of instruction. These institutions appear to be the choice of the lower class and a segment of the middle class. Religious schools – predominantly Islamic – attract a small minority of lower- and middle-class families with a strong spiritual bent. Most families invest in their children's education as a means to change their class status through the career achievements of their children in future (Sattar, 2016). The literature also highlights that the available educational choices continue to perpetuate the class-based advantage in Pakistan (Tamim, 2021; Ullah and Ali, 2018).

5.2.4 Structural Barriers in Pakistan’s Employment Landscape

Moving towards the employment context of Pakistan, employment practices deeply reflect roots in the cultural context of Pakistan. The employment context is embedded in highly masculine, unequal power distribution, hierarchical and collectivist characteristics (Ali and Brandl, 2017; Shah, Qamar, Ahmed et al., 2025). Current HRM practices present a milieu of colonial employment practices along with a mixture of traditional, cultural and modern Western practices (Jhatial, Cornelius and Wallace, 2014). Literature suggests that particular cultural factors – such as hierarchical authority, high power distance, collectivism, nepotism, *sifarish* (an Urdu term referring to the use of social and political connections to gain undue favours), cronyism, and corruption – play an intervening role in the employment and business context of Pakistan (Nadeem and Kayani, 2019; Saqib, 2018; Sattar, 2016). The strong collectivist orientation of society impedes fairness in recruitment, selection and promotion practices (Saqib, 2018; Nadeem and Kayani, 2019). Though Pakistan's constitution forbids discrimination, favouritism, nepotism and corruption, the reality poses a different picture (Ali and Brandl, 2017). Merit can be easily surpassed by a mere phone call from an influential figure within the nexus of elites (Jhatial et al., 2014; Sattar, 2016). Employment context for women reflects broader gender societal discourses (Mirza, 1999; Syed and Tariq, 2018) and underscores the masculine and patriarchal orientation of society (Ahmad and Anwar, 2018). Literature indicates that Western HRM practices may not be fully implementable in Pakistan, as they often clash with local norms (Jhatial et al., 2014; Nadeem and Kayani, 2019; Saqib, 2018), thereby creating additional barriers for already disadvantaged groups (Syed and Tariq, 2018). Furthermore, CSR practices are not well developed and are mostly influenced by a charitable approach (Lashari, Lashari, Lashari et al., 2022). Professional HR bodies such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the US and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK do not have established counterparts in Pakistan (Syed and Tariq, 2018). This lack of an institutionalised framework perpetuates the absence of standardisation and monitoring of employment practices in the country (Syed and Tariq, 2018). Although labour departments exist at the provincial level and the Ministry of Human Resource Development operates at the federal level (Syed and Tariq, 2018), their presence reflects a failed implementation mechanism – much like other political institutions in Pakistan (Bibi et al., 2018). Literature highlights that the transition from education to employment is shaped by a complex web of uncertainties, including the poor job market conditions, unequal educational quality, class-based barriers and the influence of personal connections, among other factors with the Pakistani employment sector (Ali and Brandl, 2017; Jhatial et al., 2014; Khilji, 2014; Sattar, 2016; Shaikh, 2024).

5.2.5 Concluding Remarks

This broader socio-political overview highlights the key structural and cultural conditions that define the study context. Understanding these conditions is essential for understanding the lived experiences presented in the stories that follow.

5.3 Stories of Struggle, Strength, Self-Determination, and Collective Efforts

This section now turns to how persons with disabilities in Pakistan encounter, navigate, and respond to broader structural forces in their everyday lives. To illustrate this, four participant narratives are presented, each offering insight into the life trajectories shaped by the unique challenges and contexts of disability in Pakistan.

5.3.1 From Struggle to Spark: Nabeel's Journey (Story–1)

Stories have various characters shining in them, but some characters have sparkling stories waiting to be unleashed from within. The story of a resilient 33-year-old man, Nabeel, is a classic example of combating challenges and dictating his own terms in the game called life.

This story revolves around Nabeel's life experiences with disability, the support of his family, and his journey from dependency to becoming an independent, successful entrepreneur, disability rights activist, motivational speaker, and – most importantly – a beacon of hope for millions like him.

Nabeel's parents' lives turned upside down when their happy, healthy firstborn child was diagnosed with polio at the age of two and a half, resulting in irreversible paralysis of his legs. The family sought every possible treatment available – medical or spiritual – but all in vain. Reflecting on his painful early childhood memories, Nabeel said,

> *"My parents were financially broken due to the extensive medical treatment to cure my disability. They were emotionally paralysed. One*

> *of them had to be with me all the time to look after me. This situation crushed their dreams. They had some dreams as a couple, which were shattered by my disability. {…}. This was a whole miserable situation."*

As life progressed, it was time for Nabeel to be exposed to the bitter taste of life and to understand the emotional challenges. A few decades ago, during Nabeel's early childhood, wheelchairs and disability support equipment were not as sophisticated or efficient as they are today, so he had to crawl when going out. He was called derogatory names for this. It was very depressing and disturbing, as he described. He found it extremely hard to cope with.

The next phase in life was education. He had to crawl a mountain of challenges with limited ability, a not-so-strong resolve, and a non-conducive environment. He was refused admission to regular schools. These schools, along with the parents of 'normal' children, were unwilling to accept a child with a disability. Some of them feared that their child might also 'catch' the disability simply by interacting with a disabled child – a common myth surrounding disability in the local context. Many people from the community began telling his family that education would do nothing to change his ill fate and that instead, they should worry about securing his 'three meals a day' for the rest of his life. Eventually, his parents decided not to enrol him in any school, believing that Nabeel would not be able to achieve anything in life due to his disability. However, his maternal grandparents were firmly committed to his education and decided to sacrifice their own family life for Nabeel's future. His maternal grandmother moved into their home to care for him and support his education so that both of Nabeel's parents could manage life. He was enrolled in a rehabilitation and educational centre that offered both therapy and education. Nabeel deeply appreciated the sacrifices his family made to support him and shape who he is today. He explained:

> *"Someone's success is supported by lots of sacrifices from their immediate family members, some friends, or close relatives. The term 'singlehanded' or 'self-made' is not possible in the case of a person with disability in our society. There is always someone sacrificing their own dreams to support yours."*

Juggling with this situation, Nabeel completed his high school and moved on to college, thanks to a scholarship offered by the head of a private college. The principal of his rehabilitation centre-cum-school played a pivotal role in securing scholarships for him and his peers to pursue college studies. This was the first time he began studying alongside non-disabled peers. It was at this stage that he decided to unleash the strengths he had accumulated over the years while battling the physical and emotional challenges of life. Reflecting on his formative years and the hurdles he faced in pursuing education, he said:

> *"I faced a lot of hurdles during my college life. I used to travel on non-accessible public transport using crutches. Once, I fell from the bus and the bus wheel ran over my foot. However, by the grace of God, my foot wasn't hurt much as I was wearing braces. I still have a vivid image of that scene fresh in my mind. I was sitting on the footpath after the incident, surrounded by a crowd. I could hear a mix of noises, but the most daunting ones were: 'Why does he need to get out of the home alone in this situation?' 'He should stay at home.' 'What's the need for education in this physical condition?' I was surrounded by these voices and kept asking myself, Why me? What's my fault? But that didn't bog down my resolve, and I was at the bus stop again the very next day to go to college. Something inside kept telling me that I should not leave my education. Though I was not a good student*

> *because my early educational foundation wasn't strong, I kept going. I decided to use my education as a tool to change my fate."*

Nabeel started exploring opportunities to travel abroad during his university days. He used to go to his cousin's place, who was financially better off, to use their internet and computer to apply for foreign funding. Eventually, his efforts paid off, and he received an internship offer from South Korea. It was a whole new and life-changing experience for him – travelling alone, exploring the world, and seeing 'inclusive' transport and systems for the first time. But he didn't stop there and continued to apply for more opportunities after returning. He had another chance to go to South Korea and was later selected for a leadership training program in the USA. He learned wheelchair manufacturing techniques during his internship abroad.

His transition from education to employment also reflected his determination. He accepted his first job with a compromised salary, but he chose to join rather than remain unemployed. He reflected on his employment journey by sharing the following example:

> *"I remember I started with a very low salary initially, which was not even worth telling anyone. One of the toppers of our class remained unemployed for two years because he wanted to start with a high income. But I started working with whatever was offered to me – I just wanted to work. I have a strong belief that Allah helps those who help themselves; this belief strengthened my desire to keep pursuing my dreams in life amidst all that seemed impossible. Then I gradually received offers with reasonable salaries, and a few years later, I secured a job at a well-known multinational company in the HR department with a six-digit salary – something that was the dream of all graduates at the time. If you have a positive attitude, remain*

> *consistent, and don’t focus on the odds in your environment, you can achieve your dreams. This applies to everyone, not just us (PWDs).”*

Complacency wasn’t a trait Nabeel could associate with. Despite having a desk job, a good office, and a relatively easier life, he decided to embrace new challenges and switched to sales and fieldwork. As always, he faced considerable criticism for this decision. Nabeel smiled and said,

> *“Everyone was like, ‘are you crazy? You have a desk job that suits your physical condition. Why do you want to put yourself in trouble?’ But I wanted to challenge myself. I wanted to challenge the myth in our society that a disabled person is only suitable for a desk job.”*

Having successfully battled various challenges in life gave him the confidence and courage to raise the bar and move from ‘survival mode’ to a pursuit of excellence. He decided to extract new meaning from his life and do something for others. He chose to work in domains where he had experienced difficulties throughout his life. He laid the foundation of his own organisation, which began manufacturing customised wheelchairs locally for the very first time in Pakistan. He also became an active disability rights activist and a motivational speaker.

Talking about his transition from a comfortable corporate-sector job to the development sector, Nabeel confidently explained:

> *“Everything was so calm and beautiful. I was reaching the peak of my career. One fine morning, in my cosy corporate office, sipping coffee, I saw a little girl crawling outside my window – just like I used to do 30 years ago. That moment hit me hard. I asked myself: any graduate can sit in this office chair and work for this multinational company – but who will work for these people (PWDs)? {...}. I knew this had to be my destination. That’s why I switched to the development sector. It gives me a lot of pleasure to be able to help others (PWDs). {...}. I believe in*

> *guiding those people who struggle in different phases of life like I once did. That gives me happiness. So, I chose to be part of the development sector – it's my individual choice. For me, if I can change someone's life, I value that more than working in the corporate sector just for myself. I want to be a contributor to other people's development."*

Like everyone, Nabeel has dreams in life, and his perspective on these dreams is fascinating. He believes that his dreams should be crafted by himself and not imposed by the outside world. He shared his idea of dreams as follows:

> *"Normal (non-disabled) children are encouraged to dream of becoming a doctor, engineer, or pilot, but for a child with a disability, such dreams don't exist – no one talks about these things for us. The common dreams all kids have, like becoming an entertainer (singer, dancer), cricketer, or joining the armed forces, were all wiped out from my life because they required physical ability. But then I see this in a different way. I have the option to craft my own dreams now. I think that's a blessing too. You sketch your dreams on your own, colour them, and then achieve those. These are dreams not set by society, but by you."*

Nabeel believes that the role of family support in the life of a PWD is pivotal. He was fortunate to have the support of his family and relatives, which played a massive role in helping him become the successful person he is today. He also realises that such support may not be available to all PWDs, as it was for him. Therefore, he decided to become a torchbearer for others. He explained:

> *"Starting from my grandparents' sacrifice, my parents' financial and emotional sacrifices, and my brother's sacrifice of leaving his education to support mine – it was all my family's support. 'Self-made' is a myth {…}. In societies like ours, we only have families. If a PWD reaches a prominent level, it is either due to their internal ability or the*

> *support of their family – you cannot credit the system. The system can only be credited if you hear success stories from all PWDs."*

Nabeel is now working as an internationally certified Independent Living Centre Trainer, providing peer counselling and specialising in assistive devices. He is changing perceptions and removing societal stigma around persons with disabilities. He feels indebted to those who are still trying to find meaning in life while struggling with their disabilities. His idea of supporting others is simple:

> *"I relive my moments again by seeing other people happy. That is an achievement for me."*

While Nabeel's story shines with remarkable achievements and public advocacy, not all journeys lead to visible success. Some stories unfold more quietly – marked by persistence, small victories, and silent endurance. The following story offers a different but equally important lens on navigating life with disability.

5.3.2 Holding On, Moving Forward: Abid's Journey (Story–2)

This is the story of a 29-year-old man, Abid, who is navigating life despite facing enormous challenges as a blind person. The highlights of his story revolve around early childhood experiences with disability, the role of his family's efforts, and his journey toward gaining employment against all odds.

Abid was born completely visually impaired. Being the first child with an impairment in the family, his family had no idea what to do. His parents spent a large amount of money seeking a cure for his condition. However, they were unaware of the difference between a disease and an impairment. When they heard about a team of doctors visiting from America, they decided to take Abid to them. The doctors eventually concluded that his condition was incurable and that no known treatment existed. His early years were lost in this struggle. Abid reflected on those painful days:

> *"I used to feel sad and inadequate due to my visual impairment. I felt limited in comparison to other children and was unable to do things that came naturally to them."*

After a long battle to find treatment for his blindness, Abid's family began to come to terms with his disability. However, the next challenge was his education. Although his parents were not highly educated, they firmly believed that without education, Abid would not be able to achieve anything in life. Despite their strong desire to enrol him in school, they did not know where to admit a blind child. Eventually, they identified a special school near their town, though it was far from their home. Abid still remembers the struggles his mother faced during his school years and says,

> *"I cannot forget how my mother walked 1 km with me every day to drop me at the school bus, all the way through my school life. Later, my brother grew up and took on the responsibility of taking me wherever I needed to go."*

Abid completed his school education and continued to college and university with the consistent support of his family. Reflecting with deep emotion, Abid highlighted their contribution and said,

> *"Acceptance of a child with disability by the family is of utmost importance. It is the family that supports you at every step – whether in education or employment. If my family hadn't encouraged or supported me, I wouldn't have completed my education. To be honest, I could have done nothing. The kind of opportunities a family provides defines what a PWD can become in the future."*

Educational challenges were not easy, but the transition to employment after education was an experience marked by injustice. Most people with such disabilities don’t even make it into the workforce. Survival outside the home is difficult for a blind person due to the lack of accessible infrastructure in the country. However, Abid was determined to be self-sufficient. His idea of life was not limited to doing the bare minimum. He explains:

> *“Basic life needs can be fulfilled even if your own family abandons you. There are shelter homes where you can be provided with meals and accommodation. However, there comes a point when you feel the need to rise above merely getting food. You don’t want to live a basic life – you want to have a meaningful life. {….} Then you want to see your family satisfied, especially after watching them care for you your whole life. I wanted to give this satisfaction to my parents – that I can now financially support myself like any other young adult. They don’t need to worry about me. This feeling keeps me going despite the challenges in life.”*

Abid had the realisation that opportunities for him were limited, and that he could use education as a means to earn a respectable living. He said,

> *“Having a job is crucial for achieving independence. Non-disabled individuals have many options, such as earning daily wages, starting their own small businesses, or becoming a taxi driver. However, disabled individuals can’t do all these jobs, and having a decent job is vital for their survival.”*

However, despite strong determination and continuous effort, Abid kept facing rejections during his job hunt. Eventually, he learned about an opening for a government position in the judiciary department. He appeared in a competitive exam for the job and topped the written portion. When it came time for the interview, the panel was surprised to learn that he was blind. Despite having secured the highest marks in the written exam, they were not convinced enough to offer him the job and failed him in the interview. Abid was not satisfied with the decision and decided to muster the courage to challenge it. He wrote a complaint to the Chief Justice of the High Court. The very next day, his case was heard, and the court issued directives to the department to conduct his interview again. Abid reflected on this bittersweet experience, saying:

> *“I learned that there are people who will discriminate against me because of my visual impairment, but there are also those who will fight for me and give me a chance to succeed.”*

Unfortunately, he later discovered that the department had already hired someone else for the position. They instead offered him a temporary role, giving him false hope that he would eventually be appointed to the original post. Acting in bad faith, they persuaded him to sign a document stating that he was satisfied with the resolution and that his grievance had been addressed. This was a fraudulent act committed by senior officials in the department. Later, when Abid found out about the fraud, he felt gutted and exhausted. On this occasion, he could not muster the courage to stand up for another legal battle. He lost the drive to pursue justice further and decided to settle for the little he had achieved. Notably, his family provided emotional and financial support, encouraging him to continue with the temporary, lower-level job to at least gain some work experience. A few years later, he secured a permanent job in another government department and moved on.

Abid had to endure many challenges in life, and eventually, he came to terms with living alongside them. His professional life was filled with trials, especially as a blind person. A major misconception in society is that a blind person is also mentally challenged and, therefore, incapable of using their intellect. However, Abid has disproved this many times. He now works in a permanent position within a government department, demonstrating dedication and hard work. He believes that his impairment has made him more hardworking than many non-disabled individuals. He shared his thoughts:

> *"If I were not blind, I might not have been as hardworking as I am now. Perhaps I would have felt I had many other ways to earn money, so I would have been more relaxed and not put as much effort into my job."*

He concluded his life story with the words:

> *"I hold a deep faith that if God (Allah) created me this way, He must also have a purpose and a plan for my life. This belief has played a crucial role in helping me navigate my life's challenges."*

Having explored the struggles and resilience of two men with disabilities, the following story turns to a woman whose journey adds another complex layer to the narrative: the intersection of gender and disability. In a patriarchal society, disabled women often face amplified barriers. The next story captures this reality with emotional depth, offering a powerful window into what it means to be a woman with a disability in Pakistan.

5.3.3 Twice Marginalised: Aisha's Journey (Story–3)

This is the story of a 30-year-old woman with a disability, Aisha, from a small town in Pakistan. The label of a 'disabled woman' evocatively expresses her identity. These two words are enough to capture the complexity of her life journey in a way that is difficult for outsiders to comprehend fully. Her disability has made her a minority within a minority in a patriarchal, misogynistic, and ableist society.

Aisha was born as the fourth daughter of her parents. There is no sense of celebration in being the *fourth daughter* in an Asian family that was desperately hoping for a male child. Unfortunately, during her childhood, it became evident that she had unequal growth in her lower limb bones. She later underwent multiple surgeries, but all in vain. It was a miserable situation for the family to have not only another daughter but one who was also disabled.

The pity, confusion, and horror on people's faces while staring at her had been a constant companion in Aisha's and her family's life since childhood. Some people used to make bitter remarks to her parents, suggesting that her disability might be the result of their sins. Others viewed her as a sign of God's supremacy. Reflecting on those painful stares and ignorant comments she had grown used to since childhood, she said:

> *"Some people ask me to pray for them, thinking I'm their ticket to heaven. {…} Some show unwanted sympathy to my parents. Some make sure to tell them that God is punishing them for their sins. Some praise my pretty face but never forget to mention that God gave me ugly legs. People have the audacity to say all these things to us – even on the streets. Why can't they just leave us alone? Why can't they just see me as a human being who is different from them? {…} Eventually, my family stopped taking me to social gatherings to avoid hearing all these comments."*

Education was no less of a challenge for her either. Aisha's mother and sisters used to carry her in their arms to drop her off at school. With the lack of accessible infrastructure in that small town, she had to endure unimaginable challenges during her school years. Aisha recalled that difficult time and said:

> *"I still remember, I used to skip breakfast and avoid drinking water so that I wouldn't need to use the toilet during school hours. In case of urgent need, I had to crawl to the toilet."*

She received her first wheelchair before starting college, but accessibility on campus was another hurdle. Most of her classes were scheduled on the upper floors of the buildings. The college administration was unwilling to make accommodations for a single student, so she was forced to crawl to her classes. Eventually, she decided to leave college and appear for exams as a private candidate. Her father had been the sole financial provider for the family. After his death, Aisha had to quit her education altogether, as it was no longer financially feasible for her widowed mother to bear the costs of her education, medical care, and transportation.

In a non-accommodating society like Pakistan, the struggle of women with disabilities to gain employment increases manifold. However, one of Aisha's uncles was aware of her hardships and helped her secure a job at a development centre through his connections. She believes that her job gives meaning to her life. She expressed her contentment, saying:

> *"If I didn't have my job, I would have been confined within the walls of my house."*

However, the daily struggle to reach her workplace reveals another dimension of harassment and sexism. She is often subjected to foul language, and some individuals have tried to take advantage of her vulnerable physical condition. She narrated one of the many such incidents:

> *"One of the clients started calling me and asking for inappropriate favours, making me feel very uncomfortable. He continued to harass me for a long time. Although I blocked his number, he kept contacting me from different phone numbers. This is just one example of what I go through. {…} Such things are mentally exhausting in an already emotionally strained situation."*

Although Aisha's job has been a valuable part of her life, it is not a permanent position she can rely on for the long term, which remains a constant source of worry. She believes that despite working hard, her efforts are not acknowledged in the same way as those of non-disabled employees. She feels professionally stagnant. She shared her thoughts:

"They (employers) know that we (PWDs) don't have many opportunities, and they take advantage of this situation. I see many people (non-disabled) who joined after me getting permanent positions and promotions, while I remain stuck in the same contractual role".

Nevertheless, she still feels that the job has given her the ability to support herself financially. This helps to offset her dissatisfaction with the job and brings a sense of contentment to her life.

Enjoyment and pleasure are aspects of life often not considered for people like Aisha. She recalled once going to watch a movie with her office colleagues, only to hear a comment from someone in the cinema:

> *"Why do you want to watch a movie? You should remember God instead."*

In Pakistani culture, marrying off daughters is considered one of the most significant responsibilities of parents. Most girls grow up dreaming of marriage and having their own families. However, for girls with disabilities, this dream often feels impossible. Family discussions tend to exclude marriage-related matters for disabled daughters, who are frequently seen as a lifelong burden. Aisha feels heartbroken about her dreams of getting married and shared:

"*I feel like giving up hope of getting married and becoming a mother. I only receive marriage proposals from very old men. Young men want to pursue me for friendship, but they don't consider me for a long-term marriage relationship. {…} Even men with disabilities want to marry a physically perfect woman."*

Aisha's dreams seem to be tossed into a heap of trash. Like many girls in traditional Pakistani society, her aspirations include getting married, living a dignified life free from harassment, achieving financial stability, and enjoying a sense of safety and security. However, the social realities she faces tell a very different story. She became very emotional while speaking about her aspirations:

> *"I feel I never had choices in life, nor will I ever have".*

Aisha's story reflects the plight of many women like her, who occupy the lowest tier of cultural and social marginalisation. The challenges faced by women with disabilities are often brushed under the carpet through a generalisation of disability-related issues. Yet, these women live at the intersection of patriarchy, subjugation, and sexism – and continue to remain unheard.

The following story shifts the focus from individual journeys to a collective journey. It tells the story of Omar and his friends, who came together to turn their shared struggles with disability into a movement for change in their community.

5.3.4 Sitting Together, Standing Tall: Omar's Journey Towards Collective Change (Story–4)

This is the story of the collective struggle of Omar and his friends from a small town in South Punjab – a region often neglected and marginalised. The story is a testament to how grassroots initiatives, when driven by those most affected, can bring about meaningful community change.

In a quiet, neglected corner of South Punjab – often referred to as the Saraiki belt – a group of young persons with disabilities sat together in a small shed. It wasn't an official meeting or an NGO workshop. It was just a group of friends, bonded by shared struggle and an unspoken question:

> *"How long can we wait for someone else to change our lives?"*

That gathering, humble as it was, sparked the beginning of South Punjab's first self-led disability organisation. Omar, one of the founding members, vividly remembers those early days.

> *"This was a remote area with no facilities, and our parents had no idea what to do with us. Someone told them about a special school in a nearby area, so they started sending us there. Going to school daily was another struggle. That's how we spent our childhood – in daily struggle and misery."*

As they grew older, what had once felt like isolated pain turned into shared reflection. They began discussing not just their personal challenges, but what could be done for others like them.

> *"As we grew up, we realised that we were worse off than anyone else. We often reflected on our problems and considered how to overcome them. We started this (journey) in a small shed at one of our friends'*

> *houses. It gave us a place to sit together at least and talk about our issues. We tried to find small solutions for our day-to-day problems. Gradually, people started coming to us to discuss their disabled children's problems."*

What started as informal peer counselling quickly turned into something more. They began speaking to families and challenging local myths around disability.

> *"Our efforts extended to encouraging those PWDs who had never ventured outside their homes. They were unaware of their rights, lacked education, hygiene, health knowledge, and basic living skills. We aimed to bring awareness and education to these individuals, helping them step into the world outside. {…..}. Much later, we formally became an organisation."*

Omar's group began hosting small community gatherings and engaging with families to raise awareness about disability. They also reached out to local political party members to draw attention to the issues faced by persons with disabilities. Gradually, their efforts began to gain traction. Families started listening. Local politicians took notice. Small-scale donations followed, and eventually, NGOs began to reach out. One local NGO offered capacity-building support, enabling the group to enhance both the skill and scale of their activities. Though they had no grand offices or media coverage, their growing presence in the community reflected something far more powerful: a shared sense of identity and a collective determination to bring change.

Omar reflects on this transformation:

> *"We started seeing respect in people's eyes. Our disability remained the same, but our identity changed. This led to the establishment of the first organisation for PWDs in South Punjab, led by PWDs themselves."*

With time, it became the first cross-disability, self-led initiative for PWDs in South Punjab – created by those who had once been silenced and shut away. Their goals were simple but revolutionary: to raise awareness and break the cycle of exclusion.

The organisation now runs peer counselling, distributes assistive devices, and conducts disability audits in collaboration with both public and private sectors. It holds sports events and seminars that challenge stigma and celebrate difference. In 2023, the organisation launched a flagship programme which provides resources and support for PWDs to start their businesses. Many have since successfully become self-employed. A core belief underpinning this work is that inclusion and livelihood are not possible without access to basic training and awareness. Parents are educated to differentiate between disease and disability, equipping them to support their children with special needs in more informed ways.

Reflecting on this remarkable journey, Omar says:

> *"We didn't wait for the system to include us – we created our own space. And now, we are making sure no one is left behind."*

Omar and his friends demonstrated that real transformation often begins not with policy, but with people – acting together from the bottom up. Their organisation is more than just an organisation – it is a symbol of transformation. What began as a small youth group has evolved into an impactful institution, driven by a vision of dignity, inclusion, and contribution.

Photographs of Omar and his group conducting awareness sessions and advocacy meetings are included, with their consent, to represent their collective efforts visually. These images (see Figures 5.1–5.2) demonstrate the practical impact of their grassroots work.

Figure 5.1. Addressing community issues: Community gatherings to educate families about disabilities.

Figure 5.2. Advocacy meeting: organisation members and Government officials discuss community concerns.

5.3.5 Concluding Remarks

While the stories of Nabeel, Abid, and Aisha focused on individual life trajectories – ranging from personal struggles and survival to moments of empowerment – the story of Omar and his friends illustrates how collective reflection, solidarity, and grassroots mobilisation can become powerful forces for social transformation, especially in contexts where institutional support is lacking. Together, these stories reveal the complex and often constrained paths navigated by persons with disabilities in Pakistan and pave the way for deeper analytical engagement in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Six: Seeking Work, Facing Barriers: Employment Aspirations and Contextual Challenges

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the employment aspirations of persons with disabilities alongside the personal, contextual, and institutional barriers that shape their access to work. This chapter contributes to answering all three central research questions of the study. First, it addresses the question – *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?* – by focusing on their work/employment aspirations. Second, it engages with the question – *What personal, contextual, and institutional factors enable or hinder the achievement of work and broader life aspirations among persons disabilities in Pakistan?* – by examining how participants reflected on work-related barriers and enablers. Third, it answers the question – *What strategies do persons with disabilities employ to navigate contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing their work and life goals?* – by examining how participants navigate the complex realities surrounding work. In doing so, this chapter presents a contextualised analysis of PWD's employment aspirations. Though the lived experiences of each participant were unique, common and recurrent themes emerged from their narratives, reflecting shared employment aspirations. From the empirical data, four prominent dimensions of employment emerged as central to their aspirations: (1) freedom from hiring discrimination, (2) freedom from post-hiring discrimination, (3) access to reasonable accommodation, and (4) inclusion, respect, and belonging at work. These dimensions reflect the core elements of what participants consider to be fair and dignified employment. The composition of these dimensions illustrates a picture of what equitable employment opportunities should look like – opportunities that offer dignity, inclusion, and fairness on par with those available to non-disabled individuals.

The following analysis discusses each of these four key dimensions in detail, using participants' narratives to examine the interplay between aspirations and the conditions that shape them. Where relevant, the researcher draws on prior contextual understanding to interpret participants' accounts. The subsequent sections present a comprehensive analysis of the work dimensions identified in this study.

6.2 Freedom from Hiring Discrimination

The idea of Equal Opportunity Employment gains real meaning when viewed through the lived experiences of PWDs. Participants' collective yearning for fairness at the hiring stage adds authenticity to this theme. In this study, *hiring discrimination* is understood broadly – not merely as denial of access to jobs, but also as the denial of fair, permanent, dignified, and inclusive employment opportunities. This includes being offered roles that do not match one's qualifications and facing bias based on the severity of disability or gender. The following discussion explores these specific dimensions of hiring discrimination, offering evidence of how PWDs continue to be denied equal chances at the very first step into employment.

6.2.1 Discrimination for Dignified Jobs

The findings reveal an apparent discrepancy in the types and nature of jobs offered to PWDs, as they are often overlooked for dignified, higher-level, or permanent positions despite having suitable qualifications. Almost all respondents reported being offered jobs that were significantly below their educational credentials and aspirations. This mismatch led to feelings of frustration and perceived injustice, particularly when comparing themselves to able-bodied peers with similar profiles. Some PWDs felt that they had no option but to accept these roles due to the scarcity of opportunities in the country. However, most were dissatisfied with the level at which they entered employment. They viewed this as a form of discrimination rooted in their disability. The following words from the respondents suggest what they went through to draw such conclusions.

Abid is now working in a government department. While reflecting on his employment journey, he highlighted that:

> *“Despite achieving a master's degree, I'm often offered positions such as a telephone operator or other lower clerical roles, which don't align with my educational qualifications. It is not that I don't respect those who do these jobs, but I believe I am better qualified, and I have the same level of dignity as others. We want our skills and abilities to be utilised appropriately”. (Abid, male, visually impaired)*

The researcher can relate – through her native understanding – to why the respondent emphasises the 'master’s degree'. In the context of this research, the reference to a master’s degree serves as a marker of social status and employability. Abid’s words reflect his frustration, as he sees himself as deserving of better positions. His account highlights the gap between his expectations and the reality he continues to face. The excerpt also indicates how certain kinds of jobs are associated with respect and recognition – socially valued forms of work – within the research context. Abid, despite having the same resource (education), is unable to achieve the same outcome (a notable job) as those without disabilities. The respondent’s frustration reveals a perceived violation of merit-based hiring, where disability seems to overshadow qualifications. His use of ‘we’ points to a shared experience among PWDs, suggesting a collective awareness that their capabilities are not being meaningfully recognised. This excerpt reflects more than frustration over underemployment – it highlights a deeper struggle for recognition, dignity, and fairness.

Bilal, now working as a disability rights activist, echoed similar sentiments by sharing both his own experiences and those of other PWDs. He stated:

> *“Now we have the right to get jobs, but still, people don't consider us equals. We still face wrongdoing as they don't give us higher posts, like an officer. They don't give us jobs based on our education and skills. Instead, our impairment decides our worth.” (Bilal, male, wheelchair-bound)*

This excerpt reflects the disconnect between formal rights and lived experiences as shared by all the participants with disabilities. Although PWDs are legally entitled to employment under the Disabled Persons Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance (1981), the lack of enforcement mechanisms, combined with prevailing social attitudes and workplace practices, continues to undermine this right. The speaker’s frustration over being denied higher posts despite having education and skills shows how their impairment becomes the primary lens through which their potential is judged, which is a reflection of how structural and attitudinal barriers – not impairments themselves – disable individuals. This also shows that, even when participants had similar opportunities or resources, their outcomes differed significantly because of the barriers they faced. Participants acknowledged the presence of formal employment rights but emphasised that these alone did not determine their real opportunities at work. They consistently highlighted everyday barriers – especially negative assumptions about the work-related abilities of persons with disabilities – which prevented them from benefiting from the rights that exist on paper. These attitudes acted as practical obstacles that restricted how far participants could convert formal entitlements into meaningful employment prospects.

Abid and Bilal accounts highlight how marginalised groups are systematically restricted both in the types of jobs they can access and in their upward mobility within organisations.

This is further affirmed by the CEO of a disability welfare organisation, who is herself a person with a disability and now actively works to promote the employment of PWDs. She stated:

> *"An organisation wanted to hire an employee (PWD) through us. They said they can offer a basic position and salary to him because they also wanted to hire a non-disabled employee as well who can do the work of that PWD." (Kiran, female, wheelchair-bound)*

This excerpt suggests that the dominant understanding of disability in Pakistan stems from a medical perspective and leads to a culture of pity and a charitable approach. This illustrates how institutionalised patterns of thought regarding the abilities of PWDs become deeply embedded and unquestioned, guiding organisational behaviour automatically. Participants' accounts reflected how organisational norms were often shaped around able-bodied assumptions, leading to frequent questioning of the productivity of PWDs. This pattern showed how the work of PWDs continued to be undervalued, with some being offered lower positions and salaries based purely on assumptions about their abilities. The idea that a non-disabled employee would be required to ‘do the work’ of the disabled person revealed deep-rooted ableist attitudes within the organisation. Although such hiring decisions were sometimes presented as efforts to promote diversity, participants felt that these actions did not necessarily translate into genuine equality of opportunity. Instead, they described these experiences as tokenistic – offering presence without real influence or equitable treatment. As a result, the organisation’s approach to hiring a PWD appeared more symbolic than substantive, reinforcing existing norms rather than challenging them.

All the participants with disabilities reported being hired into temporary or probationary roles with limited prospects for permanent appointment, even when performing equivalent work to non-disabled colleagues. This lack of job security undermines the dignity of work and reflects a broader trend of excluding PWDs from standard employment models (ILO, 2012).

Aisha sheds light on an often-overlooked dimension of hiring discrimination – the denial of access to permanent employment for PWDs, which reflects how they continue to be excluded from dignified and secure forms of work.

> *“The practice is that we are offered opportunities such as trainee, intern, or temporary contractual positions, but they don’t trust us with permanent roles. We are often perceived as burdens, and organisations hesitate to offer us permanent positions because they’re reluctant to take on long-term liabilities. The fear of being kicked out at any time haunts me daily”. (Aisha, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Aisha ’s quote highlights the voices of many PWDs whose experience of being consistently offered only temporary or contractual roles reflects a broader organisational reluctance to commit to their long-term inclusion. Despite fulfilling job requirements, PWDs are often seen as burdensome or risky investments, leading employers to withhold permanent positions. The emotional toll is evident in Aisha's statement, "*the fear of being kicked out any time haunts me daily*," capturing the precarity and psychological strain that accompany insecure employment. In practice, the instability and limited scope of these roles meant that formal access to work did not translate into stable or dignified employment. Participants attributed this gap to structural and attitudinal barriers that constrained their ability to benefit fully from the opportunities offered.

Stakeholders' perspectives further reveal the underlying employer attitudes that help explain such practices. The following views are shared by a representative of an NGO that works to promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

> *"You need to understand that disability inclusion in the workplace is an emerging dimension in our country, and organisations are taking an experimental approach. {….}. They remain reluctant to make long-term commitments unless they perceive clear growth potential in the individual being hired." (Stakeholder 1, female, NGO representative)*

Adding further nuance to this hesitation, another stakeholder from an NGO that serves as a liaison between employers and PWDs highlighted a perception among employers that contributes to their reluctance:

> *"We occasionally receive feedback from organisations suggesting that some PWDs are perceived to leverage their disability to seek additional accommodations, sometimes beyond what is deemed necessary. This perception contributes to employers' reluctance to*

> *make long-term commitments." (Stakeholder 5, male, NGO representative)*

These stakeholder perspectives reinforce a conditional and selective inclusion model, in which PWDs are subjected to greater scrutiny and less job security compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Furthermore, Stakeholder 5's statement also reflects a perceived misunderstanding of disability-related needs, where support measures are often seen as optional favours rather than essential workplace adjustments. This example shows how norms of broader able-bodied society feeds into normative judgments about what is "reasonable" support. It also highlights a mindset of collective penalisation toward PWDs, based on the assumed behaviour of a few. Taken together, these insights help explain the persistent employment precarity experienced by PWDs – not simply as a result of policy gaps, but as a reflection of deeper societal and institutional barriers.

A few participants with disabilities and stakeholders referred to a religious framing of disability inclusion. Although this framing does not align with a rights-based understanding of disability, it remains influential in shaping attitudes and practices.

> *"Some employers genuinely believe that hiring a disabled person will bring blessings to their business. They see it as something God will reward them for ('Swab' in Urdu as explicitly mentioned by the respondent). You know such hiring intentions are never based on a rights-based approaches." (Stakeholder 8, male, NGO representative)*

'Swab' is a religious concept, in the study context, referring to the spiritual merit or divine reward believed to result from performing good deeds, acts of charity, or helping others. This quote illustrates how religious beliefs shape institutional practices around disability inclusion. The stakeholder's observation shows that, for some employers, the motivation to hire persons with disabilities stems not from an understanding of disability rights, legal obligations, or organisational inclusion policies, but from a moral–religious belief that such actions are spiritually rewarded. In this context, hiring becomes framed as an act of charity rather than the fulfilment of a rights-based commitment. This further contributes to the inconsistency and fragility of disability-inclusive practices across organisations in Pakistan.

Together, these accounts from PWDs and stakeholders reveal that hiring discrimination is not limited to outright exclusion from employment but also extends more subtly into the nature and quality of jobs, as well as the intentions behind such job offers. Even when employed, PWDs are often confined to undignified, low-status, or temporary roles that do not reflect their qualifications, potential and rights.

However, beyond being denied dignified and secure employment, participants also reported a more specific form of discrimination – one closely tied to the severity of their disability.

6.2.2 Discrimination associated with the severity of disability

Findings reveal an added layer of discrimination linked to the severity of disability. PWDs with more complex or visible impairments often face greater barriers, as employers tend to favour those with lesser disabilities. Those with severe disabilities face two-tiered discrimination – competing not only with non-disabled applicants but also with other PWDs, where recruiters often select based on perceived 'lesser' disability.

Adnan shared that he faced continuous rejection throughout his employment journey and was eventually able to find work in the disability welfare sector. He has now established his own organisation to raise awareness about disability. Reflecting on his experience, he stated:

> *"I tried to tell them many times that my hands and mind are perfectly fine – it's just my legs. But why would any organisation want to make the effort to accommodate me with my wheelchair? You know, we are mostly hired to fill the CSR criteria, and this can be done more easily with someone who has a minor disability." (Adnan, male, wheelchair-bound)*

This excerpt reflects the speaker's frustration over being judged solely on the severity of his physical impairment rather than his actual abilities. His emphasis on having a fully functional mind and hands highlights his attempt to attribute this to the wider perception of workability associated with physical fitness, and how the norms of the ideal worker and ableism create disabling situations for him. The quote also points to the reluctance of organisations to make reasonable accommodations, a factor that significantly shaped participants' ability to participate fully in the workplace. His mention of CSR hiring reveals how inclusion can become tokenistic, with preference given to those with less visible or minor disabilities – suggesting how inclusivity initiatives are often wrapped in a business case.

Adnan's quote reflects how he was rejected due to the severity of his disability, whereas a few participants revealed a different angle of discrimination, where their visible impairment helped them secure a job, albeit in a tokenistic way. Usman shares his experience:

> *"After a lot of refusals, I eventually got a job in this big company. Soon, I realised that I was merely being kept around for optical purposes, rather than being given any meaningful opportunities to demonstrate my talent. It felt like I was being used as a display piece to impress others." (Usman, male, visually impaired)*

The quote indicates the participant's sense of disappointment with what initially appeared to be a successful employment opportunity. The reference to being kept 'for optical purposes' and 'as a display piece' points to a tokenistic form of inclusion, where the individual's presence is used to enhance the company's image and elicit sympathy from stakeholders.

Adnan's account highlights that some employers are reluctant to hire individuals with major disabilities, whereas Usman's experience shows how a major disability can sometimes be used to elicit stakeholders' sympathy and support. These contrasting situations illustrate how specific contextual conditions shape employment practices and influence the way PWDs are treated within organisations. This reinforces emphasis on an individually focused and context-specific analysis, and the need to understand how personal, social, and institutional conditions interact to shape real opportunities. While severity shapes distinct experiences of discrimination, the intersection of disability and gender adds another layer of discrimination.

6.2.3 Gender Discrimination in Hiring

The narratives of female participants reveal how gender adds an additional layer to their discrimination. Women with disabilities often reflect on broader societal attitudes while discussing workplace barriers, pointing to deeply rooted gender norms that shape their access to employment opportunities. Their accounts highlight that employers tend to prefer hiring male PWDs, viewing women with disabilities as weak, dependent, and unfit for work.

Sidra, although not speaking directly about employment discrimination, offers an important insight that should be understood within the context of gender and employment. She states:

> *"A good job is my ticket to a regular income. If we don't have this, we are dependent on our families. As women, having financial independence enables us to be in control of our lives, which is not possible in our culture otherwise." (Sidra, female, visually impaired)*

This quote shows the participant's desire for financial independence as a way to gain control over her life, which strongly reflects the influence of patriarchal norms in Pakistan. She is highlighting two intricate societal perspectives in this excerpt. First, disabled people are generally perceived as a 'burden' on their families (see disability context in Pakistan). However, there is also a gendered layer to this feeling, which becomes particularly salient when considered from the perspective of a woman raised in Pakistan – an interpretive position informed by the researcher's own contextual background. In Pakistani culture, women are traditionally seen as dependent upon their male family members. Their financial responsibility lies with their parents before marriage and with their husbands after marriage. Their financial dependence deepens their vulnerability to patriarchal control and reinforces gendered power dynamics. However, for women with disabilities, patriarchal norms pose even greater challenges. Since disability reduces their chances of marriage, women with disabilities are more likely to view themselves as a lifelong burden on their natal families. Thus, Sidra's aspiration for a ‘good job’ reflects more than economic need; it is a form of resistance against societal expectations that confine women with disabilities within the walls of their homes throughout life. Having established the reasons why women with disabilities aspire to secure good jobs, the analysis now turns to the issue of discrimination, which was raised by all the female participants with disabilities in this study.

Mariam highlighted the cultural roots behind employment discrimination. She states:

> *“Our discrimination stems from the belief that we are weak creatures, and our disability makes us further weak, so organisations avoid taking our responsibility because we are not considered as assets; instead, we are considered as liabilities”. (Mariam, female, hearing and speech impaired)*

This excerpt reflects the participant’s awareness of how deep-rooted cultural beliefs and gendered assumptions shape the discrimination faced by women with disabilities in the workplace. The participant’s phrase *“avoid taking our responsibility”* is not just casual wording; it reveals how women in general, and women with disabilities in particular, are institutionally constructed as dependents rather than contributors in the study context. Participants’ accounts suggest that social structures do not remain external barriers; over time, they become internalised and shape how individuals think about themselves and their possibilities. Mariam’s statement is a testament to how socially embedded norms limit the actual opportunities available to women with disabilities, despite their qualifications or willingness to work. The quote highlights how ableist structures intersect with patriarchal norms in shaping participants’ experiences.

Hina also echoed Mariam’s concerns and observed:

> *“Finding a job as a disabled woman is very challenging, and simply going outside is an accomplishment. Many companies would still prefer to invest in male PWDs rather than female PWDs. When a disabled woman applies for a job here, they say: ‘She can’t take care of herself; how will she do this job?” (Hina, female, crutches user)*

Hina’s statement reveals the nature of a masculine employment context, which creates compounded barriers for women with disabilities in accessing employment. Her words highlight how gender and disability intersect to shape the discriminatory experiences she faces. Her reference to ‘*simply going outside is an accomplishment’* underscores the restrictive social environment, not only due to a lack of accessibility but also because of security challenges faced by women. The researcher's socio-cultural positioning informs this interpretation as a woman and caregiver for a paralysed family member.

Taken together, these narratives illustrate gendered ableism, where disability intersects with gendered norms to shape distinct patterns of exclusion, marginalisation, and control. For Hina, patriarchal assumptions about women’s dependence are used as justification for pre-emptive rejection. For Mariam, gendered paternalism fused with ableist stereotypes acts as a justification to recast disabled women as organisational “liabilities” rather than assets. Sidra highlights the gendered consequences of labour-market exclusion: without access to decent work, women’s financial dependence is reinforced, constraining their agency. Here, gender and disability co-construct the conditions under which opportunities are either granted, withheld, or rendered merely symbolic.

These narratives of women with disabilities are a testament to how the intersection of disability and gender shapes the structural barriers that limit their ability to achieve valued capabilities such as meaningful employment, income security, and autonomy. The experiences shared by women with disabilities indicate that they face distinct forms of disadvantage that often remain unaddressed within workplace practices.

6.2.4 Concluding Freedom from Hiring Discrimination

Participants aspired to pursue employment where they would not be rejected on the basis of their gender, their disability, or the false assumptions made about their work ability. Across the accounts, it becomes clear that freedom from hiring discrimination is unevenly realised. Individual characteristics interact with structural constraints in ways that limit participants' ability to access fair and dignified entry into employment.

6.3 Freedom from Post-Hiring Discrimination

Even when PWDs manage to enter the workforce – often after persistent struggle and repeated hiring discrimination – they continue to face post-hiring discrimination, particularly in the form of unequal pay and limited opportunities for promotion. All interviewees echoed a shared experience of being underpaid and overlooked for promotion.

6.3.1 Discrimination in Pay

All the Participants highlighted the injustice of receiving a lower salary compared to their non-disabled colleagues, despite having higher disability-related expenses. They expressed a strong desire to receive fair and decent rewards that not only uphold workplace fairness but also demonstrate sensitivity to disability-related costs. Several participants voiced frustration over the disconnect between their disability-related expenses and the low wages they received.

Tahir, who works as an office assistant, highlighted the impact of low salaries paid to PWDs.

> *"With the salary they give us, I can't even cover my medical checks, let alone think about improving my life. It keeps us stuck." (Tahir, male, mobility impaired)*

Tahir's account shows how low salaries do more than limit material choices – they directly undermine his sense of dignity. His inability to afford basic medical checks signals a loss of autonomy and control over his own wellbeing. By stating that he "can't even cover his medical checks," he highlights how inadequate income forces him into a position of dependence and vulnerability. The phrase "it keeps us stuck" further conveys the emotional weight of being unable to improve one's life, suggesting that low pay traps PWDs in circumstances that compromise both their health and their dignity. His experience reflects how financial constraints translate into a diminished capacity to live with the respect, security, and self-worth that meaningful employment should provide.

Nadeem, who was previously working at a private company, shed further light on this matter:

> *"Instead of considering the different needs and associated expenses of coming to work, they do the opposite. They (employers) provide us low salaries and exploit us knowingly that we will not leave due to scarce work options." (Nadeem, male, visually impaired)*

Zara echoed a similar concern, highlighting both the injustice and emotional toll of the experience:

> *"It is discouraging that I am doing more work despite my disability, yet my salary does not reflect this. {…}. I can't help but think about how they (non-disabled) have earned more than me, but my expenses due to my disability are much higher than theirs". (Zara, female, wheelchair-bound)*

These two excerpts highlight two interlinked issues shaping the employment experiences of PWDs. First, they underscore the overlooked reality of extra disability-related expenses, particularly those associated with commuting to and from work. Inaccessible public infrastructure and transportation systems force many PWDs to rely on costly private transport, adding a significant financial burden beyond medical expenses. These structural barriers reduce the real value of the salary PWDs receive, making them economically vulnerable. Second, these quotes expose how structural conditions constrain the agency of PWDs in the labour market. Drawing on the researcher's familiarity with the local context, it is evident that employment opportunities are scarce, and this broader labour market reality shaped how participants understood their chances of securing work. This scarcity amplifies the power imbalance between employers and disabled employees. The situation persists mainly due to the absence of an institutionalised framework to regulate and monitor employment practices. While provincial labour departments and the federal Ministry of Human Resource Development do exist, their presence alone has not translated into practical implementation. The result is a workplace environment where PWDs are systematically undervalued and under-protected.

How this power imbalance between employers and PWDs translates into everyday workplace inequality is reflected in the following excerpt:

> *“The rules are the same for me, but the advantages are not. I get the same annual leave as my colleagues, but I am not given the same salary package as they are". (Amir, male, hearing and speech impaired)*

The situation reflects Amir’s perceived lack of fairness and justice within the organisation. His account points to two layers of disadvantage: first, the lack of consideration for his disability; and second, the perceived injustice in salary distribution. This highlights a precise instance of the disability pay gap wherein PWDs earn less than their non-disabled peers despite performing comparable work. This finding illustrates how organisational practices shape the conditions under which equality or inequality is negotiated, often mirroring the ways different social groups are treated in the wider society.

A representative from an NGO further illuminated this matter, stating that:

> *“I have observed that many employers perceive the act of providing employment itself as a form of assistance, with little inclination to extend support beyond that point.” (Stakeholder 6, male, NGO representative)*

The representative’s statement reveals a paternalistic organisational mindset, where the act of employing a person with a disability is seen as charity rather than an equitable professional exchange. This mindset reframes employment not as a transaction based on merit and contribution, but as a favour granted to the individual. The same structural dynamics that enable pay inequalities also appear to shape promotion practices. Several participants described being consistently overlooked for career advancement, which will be discussed in the next section.

6.3.2 Promotion Discrimination

Promotion in the workplace serves as a vital form of recognition which motivates employees to put in extra effort and establish their recognition within the organisation. For PWDs, the desire for such recognition is often intensified by the broader societal neglect of their identity. Yet, a recurring theme in participants' accounts was the organisational reluctance to promote employees with disabilities. Many reported that, regardless of their performance, they were seldom seen as candidates when senior roles became available.

Ali is working as an Assistant Manager in one of the leading subsidiaries of an MNC in Pakistan. He shared his experience:

> *"I was managing the whole department even though my designation was Assistant Manager. My manager only used to make calls and did nothing else. I am a PWD, and even then, I was doing better work than he was. When he left the job, they hired a non-disabled person from outside and did not promote me, despite my experience and performance". (Ali, male, visually impaired)*

This situation illustrates how structurally marginalised individuals, even when they demonstrate competence and strong performance, often remain confined to lower-level roles with limited opportunities for upward mobility. In this case, Ali's disability appeared to outweigh his merit, reinforcing how ableist assumptions continue to shape access to leadership roles. Drawing from work experience in both the public and private sectors in Pakistan, the researcher observes that managerial roles are often associated with masculine ideals such as strength, assertiveness, and physical presence. These traits are not only culturally valued but are institutionalised within organisational leadership practices that reinforce authority and expect unquestioned compliance from subordinates. These norms create a dual barrier: women encounter a gendered glass ceiling, while men with disabilities are excluded from leadership roles due to their perceived misalignment with dominant leadership traits. In the research context, disability is often viewed through a sympathy-based lens, which does not align with the dominant traits typically associated with leadership roles, such as authority and control. This exclusionary mechanism reflects how deeply ingrained societal beliefs shape the enactment of HR practices. In this context, the able-bodied, assertive male becomes the default managerial figure, while PWDs are perceived as misaligned with these institutional expectations.

The following excerpt from Adnan further deepens the understanding of this inequality:

> *“I didn't receive any promotions or increments like the others. When I questioned this discrepancy, the response I received was: 'Why do you need it? You're already here on scholarship. You'll receive your salary regardless of your work performance.” (Adnan, male, wheelchair-bound)*

This excerpt reflects the charitable mindset that often underpins the hiring of PWDs in the research context. The use of the term 'scholarship' functions metaphorically, implying that the participant’s employment is not a result of his competence or merit, but rather an act of benevolence. This mindset diminishes the value of his contribution and frames his salary as a form of charity rather than a rightful compensation for his work. The denial of promotion is justified through the assumption that his presence in the organisation is already a favour, which does not require any recognition or advancement.

The findings highlight the intersection of two key factors influencing participants' career trajectories: their impairment as an individual characteristic, and the prevailing social mindset – particularly as internalised by employers – as a contextual influence. Together, these factors restrict the ability of many PWDs to convert employment opportunities into meaningful career progression. Participants' accounts also pointed to the presence of an invisible ceiling, where advancement beyond certain levels remained unlikely despite competence and strong performance.

6.3.3 Concluding Freedom from Post-Hiring Discrimination

Participants' accounts reveal a clear tension between wanting to be treated the same as others and needing recognition of the additional challenges linked to their disability. On one hand, they did not want their disability identity to become a barrier to promotion and wanted opportunities based on merit. On the other hand, they expected their salary and progression prospects to reflect the extra costs and difficulties associated with living and working with a disability. This dual expectation shows the complex negotiation PWDs continually navigate, balancing equal treatment with the need for additional support to achieve fairness. Overall, the findings suggest that PWDs do not seek equality alone but also demand equity in the workplace, as the absence of such equity directly affects their ability to maintain a dignified life.

While addressing pay and promotion discrimination highlights essential aspects of fairness in employment, true inclusion for PWDs requires more than just equal treatment. Without reasonable accommodations – both within the workplace and in accessing it – PWDs remain restricted in their ability to participate meaningfully in work, which also undermines their dignity as human beings.

6.4 Access to Reasonable Accommodation

Participants highlighted the need for reasonable accommodations as essential not only for meaningful participation in the workforce but also for upholding their dignity as human beings. This demand encompassed both workplace adjustments – such as accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies – and support for commuting. Together, these accommodations are not privileges but necessary conditions for enabling equitable employment opportunities for PWDs and supporting a dignified human life.

6.4.1 Reasonable Accommodation Within the Workplace

Workplace adjustments are widely recognised as essential for reducing the disadvantage experienced by PWDs. Pakistan's law states (see Study Context Section) that employers are responsible for providing reasonable accommodations, yet participants' accounts reveal a clear gap between these legal obligations and the reality on the ground. Majority of the participants with disabilities reported that accommodations were either insufficient or absent. While PWDs with different types of impairments expressed the need for various forms of workplace adjustments, this theme does not explore these distinctions in detail. Instead, it focuses on how the absence of reasonable workplace accommodations functions as a structural barrier to realising work aspirations and to leading a dignified life, while also exposing the persistent disconnect between inclusion rhetoric and actual practice in the Pakistani employment context.

The following are the views of Bilal, who previously worked in a government department before leaving to establish his own disability welfare organisation.

> *“My office was on the second floor, and that building didn’t have any ramp, elevator, or lift. So, to get to my office, I had to crawl up the stairs to reach my desk. I literally compromised my dignity to continue working. But to be honest, this issue was not just a matter of accommodation – it was a matter of my dignity. That was a decisive point for me. I decided to leave this continuous insult and do something for myself and others like me who were suffering in the same way." (Bilal, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Bilal’s account powerfully illustrates how the absence of reasonable accommodation in the workplace is not merely an accommodation issue, but a violation of personal dignity. His experience of having to crawl up the stairs to reach his office reflects a disregard for basic accessibility standards in society. The infrastructure standards also indicate who belongs in these spaces. Bilal reframes the issue from one of physical access to one of moral failure on the part of the institutions. He senses that this situation intensifies disability stigmatisation by failing to accommodate his different needs, which results in pushing him to lead a demeaning work life. This narrative provides a snapshot of the daily struggles PWDs face in Pakistan while pursuing education, employment, or daily life. It portrays the institutional insensitivity towards PWDs, where their impairments are considered a problem of their own, leading to limited accommodating public infrastructure. Participants’ accounts pointed to the neglect of public facilities and wider social deprivation as key factors limiting their freedoms, opportunities and dignity. This can be seen in the example mentioned above, which led Bilal to suffer an undignified work life. The excerpt also indicates that this moment became a turning point for him, marking the transition from compliance to resistance. It was a critical moment of awareness to recognise and challenge the unjust structures shaping their lives. Bilal took these barriers as a challenge to support others who were struggling like him, which eventually led him to establish a disability welfare organisation.

Nadia, who completed her medical degree despite numerous challenges, reflects on her experience in the hospital workplace:

> *"There wasn't any adjustment offered to me according to my needs. I assessed my own requirements and made the environment more comfortable for myself." (Nadia, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Nadia's account highlights a personal coping mechanism developed in response to the absence of reasonable adjustments in her workplace. Her experience also reflects a significant critique of institutional failure. The burden of accommodation is shifted entirely onto her.

This is further endorsed by Kiran, who is herself a person with a disability and runs a disability welfare organisation aimed at supporting the employment of PWDs. In this account, she sheds light on general accessibility issues, as well as her experiences with employers engaged in disability employment.

> *"I have experienced that lack of accommodation is in everything – be it technology, worktable heights, entrance doors, toilets, or kitchens – you name it. For normal people, these might not matter, but they mean everything to us. Let me share an example with you. A PWD got the opportunity to work for an organisation through us, but the organisation*

> *failed to create an accessible environment. So, the employers asked the newly hired PWD to come to the office once a week for a short time, and he could work from home for the rest of the days. {...} This is the situation of accommodation here. Trust me, PWDs can thrive in the workplace, provided that the right conditions are enabled for them". (Kiran, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Kiran, drawing from her own experience and interactions with various organisations involved in disability employment, highlights the general state of workplace accommodation in Pakistan. Her categorisation of barriers – from basic to more complex adjustments – captures the pervasiveness of inaccessibility. What may seem trivial to able-bodied individuals becomes crucial for PWDs, often determining whether they can accept or retain a job. This illustrates how ableism is embedded not only in social norms but also in the physical infrastructure of workplaces. Her example of an employer offering remote work as a 'quick fix' rather than creating an accessible environment illustrates a superficial commitment to inclusion. The narrative affirms that PWDs can thrive when the right conditions are in place and demonstrates that the achievement of their aspirations is deeply tied to structural contexts.

Following stakeholder perspective sheds further light on this matter. A member of the HR team highlighted the issue of cost, stating:

> *"Cost remains a significant concern, as modifying existing infrastructure to accommodate the needs of only one or two individuals is financially burdensome, whereas paying a penalty is easier." (Stakeholder 10, male, HR Team member)*

The HR person's reference to "one or two individuals" is a symbolic hint towards PWDs' minimal presence in the workforce. This framing is also linked to the government-mandated 2% quota for PWD employment (See Study Context Section). By juxtaposing the cost of infrastructural modification with the relative ease of paying a penalty, the statement underscores how organisations can bypass inclusion mandates through minimal financial outlay. This reasoning – rooted in organisational mindset – constrains individuals' ability to turn resources such as legal quotas into valued aspiration such as meaningful employment. Despite the presence of employment quotas, weak enforcement means that non-compliance can be addressed simply by paying a small fine, highlighting the lack of institutional commitment to implementing disability quotas. Cost-minimisation is prioritised over equity and inclusion. In effect, the remark encapsulates how institutional loopholes and entrenched social beliefs interact to curtail opportunities for PWDs, reducing their ability to secure dignified work.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the lack of workplace accommodations is a serious concern, undermining the ability of persons with disabilities to secure and sustain employment and to work with dignity.

In addition to the issue of workplace accommodations, another primary concern that emerged from participants' accounts is the lack of accessible travel. Without inclusive transportation systems, even the most supportive work environments remain out of reach for many PWDs.

6.4.2 Supported travel to and from work

The saying '*only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches'* aptly captures the everyday struggles PWDs face with something as fundamental as commuting. For participants in this study, travelling to and from the workplace emerged as one of the most daunting challenges. All respondents with disabilities, regardless of impairment type, pointed to the lack of accessible, affordable, and safe transportation as a significant barrier to meaningful employment and as something that undermines their dignity. There was a shared desire for travel support – not as a privilege, but as a necessary condition to enable participation in the workforce. This section highlights how the absence of accessible transport reflects deeper structural barriers that limit the realisable opportunities for PWDs in Pakistan's employment landscape.

The following vignettes illustrate the reasons behind participants' desire for travel support, as well as the consequences of its absence.

> *"The public transport infrastructure is entirely inaccessible. Travelling poses a serious challenge for anyone like me. I cannot travel independently unless I hire a private cab for pick and drop. This is very frustrating because it feels like we're not being given the same opportunities as everyone else. But despite these challenges, we continue to push forward. {...} Getting accessible transport from the workplace would be the biggest wish for any working PWD." (Shahid, male, visually impaired)*

> *"Our transport system doesn't have accessibility for disabled workers. Because of this, when a disabled individual gets a job, they spend almost all of their salary on transport expenses. This is because we can't use any local transport and are limited to using online cab services – unless we have our car and driver. Therefore, almost the entire salary is spent on transport, and in the end, we are left empty-handed." (Bilal, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Shahid, who is visually impaired and teaches at a special school, attributes his inability to travel independently to the combined effect of his disability and inaccessible public transport. His account highlights a critical realisation that the lack of accessible infrastructure is a form of discrimination rooted in ableist ideology. As a contextual insider, the researcher attests to the state of roads and transportation in Pakistan, which remain inaccessible primarily to PWDs. In such conditions, continuing a job daily is no less than a challenge. Shahid identifies the inability to commute independently as one of the key barriers to sustained employment for PWDs. Most are either dependent on family members for pick-up and drop-off or are left with the costly option of private transportation. Despite the widespread prevalence of disability in Pakistan (See study context section), the absence of disability considerations in public infrastructure reflects institutional neglect. Yet, Shahid's account also shows a strong sense of resilience, as he highlights that despite facing these daily challenges, PWDs continue to move forward.

Bilal's narrative further underscores this issue by drawing attention to the added financial burden created by the lack of accessible transportation, showing how such costs undermine not only mobility but also the dignity that comes from participating in life on equal terms. His account illustrates a common experience among working PWDs: having to rely on private services due to the inaccessibility of public transport. These findings highlight this connection by showing how inaccessible transport limits the real freedom of PWDs to obtain and sustain employment, particularly in contexts like Pakistan, where accessibility is limited.

It is worth mentioning that the narratives of men with disabilities are rooted in their lack of independence to commute due to the inaccessibility of public transport and the related expenses. In contrast, the narratives of women with disabilities are shaped by gendered concerns around safety while commuting in public spaces.

The following vignette of Mariam, who is working in a bank, is shared as an example to highlight this aspect.

> *"It is challenging for me to travel alone to get to work. Due to the situation in the country for women, my family does not allow me to travel alone by private cab or public transport. God forbid something bad happens – I can't even call out for help. Therefore, my father or brother picks me up and drops me off daily. I feel that if I received transport service from my company, it would be a big relief for me and my family." (Mariam, female, hearing and speech impaired)*

Although Mariam does not experience a physical impairment that restricts her access to public transport, her narrative is deeply embedded in the gendered dynamics of women's safety within the research context. The underlying message of her quote suggests that the family's approach to managing a female member's disability in public space is strongly influenced by social constructions of gender and the nature of public domains. Families of disabled women often fear misconduct, harassment, or assault (See Study Context Section). As a contextual insider, the researcher recognises that male-dominated public spaces and unequal gender relations in society heighten this vulnerability. Mariam perceives herself as especially fragile in this context due to her inability to call for help, leading her family to take extra precautions. Her male family members' support for her commute reflects a broader patriarchal belief that men are responsible for protecting women (See study context section). This situation illustrates the complex interplay of institutional mechanism underlying personal and contextual factors– including patriarchy, weak enforcement of sexual harassment laws, gender-based social restrictions, impairment, and family roles – all of which shape Mariam's desire for travel support.

What is particularly noteworthy is that while majority of both male and female participants with disabilities expressed a desire for travel accommodation, the underlying reasons behind their desires were entirely different. This underscores the complexity of human lives and how the social context shapes desired aspirations.

6.4.3 Concluding Access to Reasonable Accommodation

The findings make it evident that reasonable accommodation is not a special favour but a fundamental requirement for enabling full workplace and societal inclusion for PWDs. Participants consistently described how inaccessible workplaces and the lack of accessible transport function as major structural barriers, preventing them from sustaining employment and undermining their dignity in daily life. Their demand for both workplace and travel accommodations reflects a broader call for equity – one that is essential not only for fair participation in employment but also for maintaining a dignified and self-determined life.

6.5 Inclusion, Respect, and Belonging at Work

Participants’ experiences reveal that beyond physical barriers and material disadvantage, PWDs also struggle with a lack of recognition, belonging, and respect in the workplace. This theme brings together two closely related issues – freedom from workplace mistreatment and the desire for social integration – highlighting how social attitudes and workplace cultures continue to marginalise PWDs in subtle but harmful ways.

6.5.1 Freedom from Workplace Mistreatment

Who doesn't want to be treated with dignity – whether in everyday life or at the workplace?

Workplace mistreatment is a subtle yet damaging form of negative behaviour that aims to demean, intimidate, or emotionally harm individuals. It can manifest through unwanted actions that humiliate, mock, or marginalise others. The narratives of most PWDs in this study reveal diverse forms of mistreatment, including indecent behaviour, lack of acknowledgement for their contributions, and unfair comparisons with able-bodied colleagues. Their accounts reflect a more profound desire not only to be respected but also to be free from belittlement and bias.

PWDs shared experiences of incivility from co-workers, often in the form of unpleasant jokes and demeaning comments. The narratives of men with disabilities indicated that people doubted their ability to work, while women reported an added layer of misogyny embedded in such comments. The following vignettes shed light on this:

> *"I often hear remarks like, 'Oh, you are hobbled but still you can do this,' in a sarcastic manner. This kind of behaviour creates further hurdles for us in the workplace. I seriously wish for a respectful work culture." (Imran, male with a limb length discrepancy)*

A female respondent shared the following account:

> *"After getting a long-overdue increment, instead of being congratulated by my colleagues, I heard comments like: 'You dressed up well, that's the reason,' or 'You must have made a good impression*

> *on the boss.' Such comments reflect the skewed mentality of society towards women with disabilities." (Hina, female, crutch-user).*

These narratives reflect how normalised crude humour and sarcasm embedded in social culture (see Study context section) reinforce ableist stereotypes within the workplace. The sarcastic remark, "*Oh, you are hobbled, but still you can do this*," reflects a typical social attitude where disability is seen as incompatible with competence. Such comments imply that a disabled person's ability to perform well is surprising, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes about disability. While such comments may be dismissed socially as 'just jokes, in reality, they reflect deep-rooted assumptions about the limitations of disabled individuals. This highlights a stereotyped identity of disabled people as inherently less capable, while also showing the urgent need for a respectful and inclusive work culture, as expressed by the Imran. This also indicates the prevalence of a lack of knowledge and sensitivity towards disabilities in Pakistan in general (see Study context section).

On the contrary, the narrative of Hina reflects how misogynistic attitudes intersect with ableism to undermine the achievements of women with disabilities. Instead of receiving genuine acknowledgement for her long-overdue salary increment, the respondent is met with remarks attributing her success to her physical appearance or to supposed favour from a male superior. These remarks not only belittle her professional competence but also reflect a broader gendered and ableist mindset that questions the legitimacy of women's success particularly when they are disabled. Such responses reveal how patriarchal norms continue to frame women's accomplishments as outcomes of attractiveness rather than merit, thereby reinforcing both misogyny and structural inequality within the workplace in the study context.

The experiences shared by respondents reveal that workplace incivility is often embedded in everyday interactions, jokes, and sarcastic remarks that reflect deeper societal biases. Such behaviours take away the recognition of their hard work and achievements, making it harder for disabled individuals to be seen as capable professionals. As some of the participants indicated, the lack of genuine acknowledgement for their contributions further undermines their sense of inclusion and self-worth in the workplace.

Adnan, who has started a disability welfare organisation, shared his past experience of working in the corporate sector:

> *“We are often confined to our seats due to limited mobility and remain focused on our tasks. We have fewer options to pass the time compared to others in the office. Despite this dedication, our work is never acknowledged. The management doesn't recognise or reward us for completing tasks efficiently or going beyond our job responsibilities. They often mocked me by saying, ‘Why do you stay so busy? Just come and go.’ This made me feel belittled and undermined my potential”. (Adnan, male, wheelchair-bound)*

The interviewee draws attention to the painful contrast between his experience and that of his non-disabled colleagues in the workplace. He reflects on the broader work culture in Pakistan, where employees frequently take breaks, engage in casual conversations, and move freely around the office. In contrast, his physical impairment limits his mobility, confining him to his seat. He interprets this constant presence and lack of leisure as a form of extra dedication to his work. He further critiques the prevailing attitude in the workplace, where PWDs are not seen as truly productive contributors. Instead, their employment is often framed within a charity-oriented lens, rooted in sympathy rather than merit. The sarcastic remark, “Why do you stay so busy? Just come and go,” implies that his presence or performance holds little value. This also indicates a prevailing social mindset that reduces disabled individuals to passive recipients of goodwill rather than professionals with skills and potential. In this case, the respondent’s productive presence in the workplace is rendered undervalued, reinforcing the broader systemic exclusion faced by disabled individuals.

These implicit biases shape workplace culture in subtle ways and undermine PWDs’ dignity and contribution. As one HR team member indicated:

> *“When HR recruits PWDs, concerned departments often contest the decision. {…..}. I have noticed that even when there's a push from us to recruit people with disabilities, line managers get nervous. There is this unspoken assumption that productivity will drop or that they will need to ‘go easy’ on the person. Though I disagree with this, but these concerns do exist.” (Stakeholder 11, female, HR team member)*

This account reflects implicit forms of workplace mistreatment that begin even before a PWD has the chance to prove their abilities. The HR stakeholder describes how recruitment decisions involving PWDs are contested by concerned departments, revealing a deep-seated scepticism about their competence. These assumptions subtly undermine professional credibility from the outset, positioning PWDs as less capable and in need of special treatment. Such biases, embedded within the organisational cultural norms shape everyday workplace interactions and can erode dignity, belonging, and respect.

The HR manager’s remarks illustrate one example of how ableist assumptions shape workplace treatment. Yet, as PWDs’ accounts reveal, these assumptions can also lead to another form of mistreatment – constant comparison with non-disabled colleagues against able-bodied standards.

> *“Criticism often arose about my work pace. There was an expectation for me to match my work speed with non-disabled colleagues, despite the additional hurdles we faced. There was a tendency to compare my performance with that of non-disabled colleagues – as if someone had completed the work in one hour, but I took one and a half hours. However, this comparison overlooked the additional challenges I faced”. (Noman, male, hearing impaired)*
>
> *“I get to hear that I am very demanding and want additional or different arrangements – why can’t I adjust like other people in the office? It is not about protocols; it’s actually about the difference in my basic needs.” (Aisha, female, wheelchair–bound)*

Both excerpts reflect how workplace environments normalise able-bodied expectations and position PWDs as ‘demanding’ when they seek accommodations that reflect their legitimate needs. The excerpts highlight how PWDs perceive workplace cultures as favouring norms and performance parameters based on the characteristics of the majority. Noman critiques the unfair performance comparisons between disabled and non-disabled workers. In contrast, Aisha is being accused of being ‘difficult’ to request different arrangements. A shared theme emerges from these narratives: the denial of difference and the expectation to conform to dominant norms, which are implicitly designed around able-bodied experiences. These contradictions are particularly evident – workplaces provide limited accessibility and resources for PWDs, yet they impose performance and compliance expectations based on able-bodied standards. Such practices do not only create structural barriers but also undermine the dignity of PWDs by denying their basic needs and failing to recognise the legitimacy of their embodied experiences.

These accounts highlight that workplace mistreatment of PWDs extends beyond formal exclusion to include subtle forms of devaluation, comparison, and insensitivity. Addressing workplace mistreatment demands institutional changes that enable PWDs to convert opportunities into real freedom to live and work with dignity.

Closely related to workplace mistreatment is the issue of social integration. While mistreatment often manifests in subtle forms of jokes, comparisons and devaluation, it is sustained by the absence of meaningful social inclusion.

6.5.2 Desire for Social Integration

Social integration at the workplace refers to the relationships and informal interactions individuals build with colleagues, which is closely tied to their overall sense of work well-being. The majority of PWD interviewees expressed a strong desire for social integration, indicating that inclusion goes beyond just physical presence at work. However, their experiences reveal that the opportunities for social mingling are often discouraged not only by colleagues but also by management, due to various structural or attitudinal barriers. This is illustrated through the following vignettes.

> *"Office discussions often revolved around topics like economics, politics, sports, movies, and so on, but I never had the opportunity to discuss these subjects with my colleagues. I was not usually invited to join them during lunch breaks or prayer breaks, which further added to my feelings of isolation. [...] I felt that the staff shared a close-knit, family-like atmosphere, discussing both personal matters and*

> *productive work, but I remained an outsider." (Nadeem, male, visually impaired)*

Nadeem’s account highlights the subtle exclusion of PWDs from informal social interactions at work. The participant’s inability to join conversations on common topics such as politics or sports, coupled with being excluded from communal activities like lunch or prayer breaks, points to the subtle but powerful role of social capital in fostering a sense of belonging. The respondent’s phrase *‘I feel an outsider’* reflects how belonging is constructed not only through formal roles but also through access to informal social spaces. As a cultural insider, the researcher rarely encountered PWDs in schools, workplaces, or public spaces in Pakistan – not because they were absent, but because those spaces were largely inaccessible. This invisibility reinforces a social divide between them and the so-called 'normal' society. Given that PWDs often experience exclusion in wider society, their sensitivity to workplace belonging is heightened. The absence of social inclusion at work may therefore resonate more deeply, reinforcing feelings of isolation and marginalisation. PWDs’ perceived lack of normalcy also puts them out of the equation when it comes to being included in everyday discussions. As a result, non-disabled individuals often feel hesitant or uncertain about initiating social relationships with PWDs. Nadeem’s experience illustrates how a lack of social integration is a form of exclusion, undermining his sense of belonging and well-being.

Another layer of workplace social exclusion, as highlighted by some of the interviewees with disabilities, is the tendency of management to exclude PWDs from social activities and events. As Hassan reflected on his experience:

> *"Most of the time, I was not invited to official gatherings. My organisation took staff on official tours regularly. However, I was never considered for this. They never asked me to go with them. It broke my heart. I wanted to be included. I felt more isolated, that everyone else was different from me". (Hassan, male, wheelchair bound)*

Hassan's narrative indicates how exclusion from social activities sends a powerful message of not belonging. Not being perceived as 'suitable' for social activities reflects a stereotype of PWDs as socially inactive or unfit for leisure participation. However, the following perspective of the HR manager highlighted a different version. He stated:

> *"It's not that organisations deliberately exclude them. Sometimes, it becomes difficult. Many activities are held outside the workplace, and there is no guarantee that the facilities will be accessible. To avoid any accidents, we tend to be extra cautious." (Stakeholder 12, male, HR team member)*

Stakeholder 12's perspective offers a rationale for the exclusion Hassan described, framing it not as a deliberate act of marginalisation but as a precautionary measure due to uncertainties about accessibility at external venues. This managerial viewpoint shifts the focus from intent to logistical constraints, implying that exclusion may be a by-product of risk aversion rather than overt prejudice. However, such "caution" still results in the same outcome – PWDs are denied opportunities for social integration, reinforcing their marginalisation. While the stated motivation is safety, the effect aligns with ableist assumptions that PWDs are inherently more vulnerable and less capable of managing such risks themselves. This highlights a tension between organisational risk management practices and the rights of PWDs to participate fully in workplace social life.

These accounts reveal that PWDs seek meaningful social inclusion at work. Fulfilling the desire for social integration is essential for achieving dignity and belonging at work. Their lack of social integration reflects deeper cultural and structural barriers. This is also a testament to how the achievement of specific aspirations – such as social integration – is inherently relational, relying not only on individual agency but also on the willingness and capacity of others to create inclusive environments.

6.5.3 Concluding Inclusion, Respect, and Belonging at Work

The findings reflect that true inclusion at work goes beyond physical access to employment. It requires freedom from mistreatment, recognition of effort, an understanding of differences, and meaningful opportunities for social connection. It also depends on workplace cultures that value dignity, respect individual needs, and create conditions where PWDs can participate fully without fear of judgement or exclusion.

6.6 Concluding Employment Aspirations and Contextual Challenges

The findings in this chapter show that PWDs value work opportunities that provide fairness, respect, meaningful contribution, and a sense of social integration. Their aspirations are shaped not only by personal characteristics but also by the broader social, cultural, and institutional conditions that structure everyday life. Underpinning these aspirations is a clear desire for a dignified work life – one in which they are included, valued, and supported, and where they can contribute on equal terms.

Participants' accounts reveal how deeply structural and attitudinal barriers restrict access to valued work. Many described being excluded from opportunities altogether, while others spoke of being included only under conditions that limited their potential to thrive. These experiences highlight both the persistence of overt forms of exclusion and the more subtle forms of unfavourable inclusion that undermine dignity, autonomy, and long-term career progression.

PWDs demonstrated acute awareness of the unjust conditions shaping their working lives. Their narratives show not only hardship but also everyday acts of resistance, where individuals actively negotiate, challenge, and seek to transform the constraints they face. Their reflections offer insight into how aspirations, agency, and structural barriers intersect in the pursuit of dignified and meaningful employment.

Taken together, the findings suggest that employment for PWDs cannot be reduced to physical access or formal inclusion alone. It requires environments that recognise difference, support equity, uphold dignity, and enable individuals to realise valued work aspirations within contexts that genuinely accommodate their needs. These insights lay the foundation for a deeper discussion on how broader social and institutional structures shape disability and work in Pakistan.

Chapter Seven: Education, Aspiration, and Exclusion: Voices of Persons with Disabilities

7.1 Introduction

While the preceding chapter explored the employment aspirations of persons with disabilities (PWDs), it became evident that these aspirations are deeply intertwined with their educational experiences. Many participants emphasised that inclusive and meaningful education is not merely a pathway to employment, but a foundational component in shaping their self-worth, sense of social belonging, and future possibilities. This chapter, therefore, examines their educational aspirations embedded within contextual realities. This chapter contributes to answering all three central research questions of the study. First, it addresses the question – *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?* – by examining their educational aspirations and how they envision educational spaces as critical sites of transformation and inclusion, laying the foundation for equitable access to meaningful work/employment. Second, it engages with the question – *What personal, contextual, and institutional factors enable or hinder the achievement of work and broader life aspirations among persons disabilities in Pakistan?* – by examining how participants reflected on structural and attitudinal barriers. Third, it answers the question – *What strategies do persons with disabilities employ to navigate contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing their work and life goals?* – by highlighting how participants remain persistent in pursuing education despite exclusion, make adaptive choices, and advocate for the inclusion of disability awareness in the curriculum. From the empirical data, three prominent themes emerged as central to their educational aspirations: (1) aspirations for quality and equitable education, (2) striving for inclusive education, and (3) transforming mindsets through disability awareness in educational content. Throughout this chapter, the analysis draws on contextual understanding to interpret participants' reflections on education within the socio-cultural realities of Pakistan. The following sections present a comprehensive analysis of educational aspirations identified in this study.

7.2 Aspirations for Quality and Equitable Education

A strong theme that emerged from the responses was the pursuit of quality and equitable education. In the context of this study, it highlights the lack of educational quality experienced by PWDs in their educational pathways. Participants strongly disapproved of the quality and type of education provided in special schools and, in some cases, in religious schools as well. Their accounts consistently reflected the view that their education was not on par with that of non-disabled peers. Compromised educational quality was described in terms of simplified curricula, outdated teaching methods, limited access to technology, restricted subject choices – especially for those with severe disabilities – and a predominant focus on rehabilitation rather than academics. Many also pointed to the absence of proper career guidance in these schools. For most, the poor quality of education was seen as a significant reason for the professional inequalities they encountered later in life. This persistent gap between their educational efforts and employment outcomes underlined their belief that what they received was not education in its truest sense, but a compromised version that failed to offer an equitable starting point in life. The following excerpts from participants are shared below to convey these concerns.

Nabeel, speaking with deep frustration, condemns the role of special schools in reinforcing a separate and stigmatised identity among disabled children. He questioned the very logic of segregation, stating:

> *"I attended a special school, which left me unaware of how the 'normal' world operates and how to interact with others. I was isolated from them for a good 15 years. Do you think disabled children are animals ('janwar' in Urdu, as used by the participant) to be herded into separate schools?" (Nabeel, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Nabeel expressed his visible bitterness about his years in a segregated school by describing the emotional toll of being cut off from the rest of society. His use of the term *janwar* (translated as 'animal' in English) is particularly striking. While 'animal' in English may carry connotations of dehumanisation, janwar in the Pakistani context carries much sharper and more derogatory connotations. Drawing on cultural understandings, the term *janwar* is commonly used in Pakistani society as a verbal insult to shame or degrade someone, implying not only inferiority but also a lack of reason, logic, and civility. By asking, "*Do you think disabled children are janwar to be herded into separate schools?",* Nabeel is calling out the institutional logic that treats PWDs as less than human and unworthy of being part of the 'normal' world. His views cannot be understood in isolation; instead, they are embedded in the wider educational and social structure in Pakistan.

As previously discussed in the study context, mainstream schools in Pakistan often lack the infrastructure and policies to accommodate students with disabilities – especially those with more severe impairments. This early segregation fosters long-term social isolation, limiting opportunities for interaction between PWDs and their non-disabled peers. Nabeel's words, then, reflect not only personal pain but also the cumulative effects of systemic exclusion that begin in childhood and shape broader social experiences. This excerpt also reinforces the idea that educational institutions are the initial spaces in an individual's life that inflict some form of emotional harm on those from marginalised backgrounds. Here social attitudes, physical infrastructure and legislation are critical factors that determine whether PWDs can truly access and benefit from inclusive education. The majority of participants with disabilities perceived their special schools as spaces of passive care rather than active learning. The following account captures this sentiment clearly:

> *"It's merely about keeping a child with a disability in school for a short time so their parents can have a break. Some schools just take the kids in but don't really teach them anything. That's not good education. Children with disabilities deserve the same kind of education that students without disabilities receive." (Saad, male, Congenital Amputee)*

This participant's quote highlights a critique of the tokenistic nature of many special schools, as experienced by these PWDs. This account echoes a common concern among participants that special schools often function more as holding spaces than true educational institutions. The participant exposes the lack of academic rigour and meaningful engagement in these settings. The desire for 'the same kind of education' as their non-disabled peers underscores a demand for equity rather than mere access.

A special education teacher offers additional insight into the matter, reflecting on her experiences with the families of persons with disabilities. She stated:

> *"Many families still believe that children with disabilities do not require education, assuming they will remain dependent and therefore viewing them as a burden rather than as potential contributors to the family." (Stakeholder 13, female, special education teacher)*

Together, these accounts reveal how low expectations – rooted both within families and embedded in special education practices – undermine the educational experiences of children with disabilities. Saad's critique of special schools as spaces of "passive care" rather than active learning highlights institutional complacency. At the same time, the teacher's perspective exposes how familial beliefs about inevitable dependency feed into this lack of academic ambition. Both point to an education system where mere attendance is mistaken for inclusion.

A small number of participants with disabilities, along with some stakeholders, indicated that some families choose purely religious education as the educational pathway for their disabled children. This is illustrated in the following excerpt.

> *"Some families, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, preferred to send their disabled children to religious schools (madrassas in Urdu), believing that religious education would enhance their social status and help counteract disability-related stigma, however, this leaves little opportunities for economic independence later in life". (Stakeholder 2, female, NGO Representative)*

Stakeholder 2's account suggests that some low-income families choose religious schools for their disabled children as a strategy to enhance their social standing. In contexts where religion is associated with piety and respect, madrassa education provides a socially valued identity that helps families counter disability-related stigma. This reflects how parents navigate social environments by choosing pathways that elevate honour and acceptance in the eyes of the community. The quote also highlights how religion operates as a powerful social force shaping community mindsets, making religious education a culturally recognised source of dignity and protection. In this sense, religious education becomes more than a spiritual pursuit – it becomes a social shield, helping families challenge negative attitudes and carve out respectability within a society that often marginalises disability. However, this choice comes with significant trade-offs: a purely religious education does not prepare children for employment, limiting their future opportunities for economic independence.

Across the interviews, the majority of participants with disabilities connected the quality of their education with their future employment prospects. This concern is illustrated in the next account, where Mariam discusses the limitations of special education and its impact on later opportunities. She notes:

> *"Our curriculum contents are simplified on the assumption that we won't grasp complex concepts. This lack of belief in our potential has limited our opportunities to pursue professions such as medicine or engineering. The choice of courses available to us is also limited, as there are only a few options for certain disabilities. It is disheartening to face such limitations when all we need is a fair platform to showcase our abilities and pursue our chosen paths". (Mariam, female, hearing and speech impairment)*

Mariam's account exposes how special education settings often operate on deficit-based assumptions about the cognitive abilities of PWDs. This is indicative of the blurred boundaries between physical and mental impairment perceived by society, mainly due to the general absence of social awareness about diverse disabilities. These beliefs often shape expectations about their future dependency. The yardstick to measure their educational abilities is usually based on the severity of disability. By simplifying curricular content, educators unintentionally restrict these students' intellectual growth and academic aspirations. Her reflection reveals that this lack of belief in their potential not only limits their access to education but also blocks off paths to high-status professions. Her statement also highlights a sense of injustice not due to any inherent limitation, but due to structural barriers and institutional arrangements. Her demand for 'a fair platform' underscores the demand for equity and agency and the right to pursue a life one has reason to value.

Sana further extends the discussion by illustrating how the quality of education sets the stage for professional life. She reflects on how educational deficiencies continue to shape her experience in the professional realm:

> *I believe that differences in the quality of education created a massive gap between them and us. It is difficult for us to compete with non-disabled people on a level playing field in professional life." (Sana, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Sana's account explains how disparities in the quality of education received by PWDs continue to shape their professional trajectories. She draws a direct link between the inferior educational experience in special schools and the uneven playing field faced in the job market. Sana's reflection must also be viewed in the context of Pakistan's multi-layered education system, which offers vastly different educational experiences (see the Study Context Section). Most special schools for PWDs are under-resourced, government-funded institutions that lack educational quality and do not offer instruction in English, which is widely regarded as a marker of prestige and opportunity. Private (paid) education is widely considered superior and has become the preferred choice for many due to its better resources and professional outcomes. Furthermore, a significant divide exists in the medium of instruction: while government schools (mainstream and special) use Urdu, private schools predominantly use English. As emphasised in the study's context section, English creates a sharp divide by reinforcing class status and is also seen as a form of currency for employability. This linguistic divide further marginalises PWDs from special schools, who are not only deprived of quality education but also denied access to the linguistic skills that are often crucial for employability. All of these scenarios reinforce the widespread social perception – both in broader society and within the PWD community – that their education is not on par with that of non-disabled individuals in Pakistan.

7.2.1 Concluding Aspirations for Quality and Equitable Education

The findings reveal that most of the PWDs perceive their existing educational pathways as a key contributor to the construction and reinforcement of a stigmatised identity, one that isolates them from mainstream society. Although some families choose religious educational pathway to reduce the stigmatised identity of disability, it ultimately reduces prospects of economic independence.

Participants’ accounts suggest that special education often deepens the divide by segregating disabled learners in both physical and symbolic ways. These segregated systems not only marginalise PWDs but also undermine their potential for equal participation in the labour market. Collectively, these perspectives reinforce that PWDs expect much more from education –

expectations that cannot be fulfilled through separate and unequal systems. Instead, achieving these aspirations requires rethinking education as a space for equity and inclusion.

7.3 Striving for Inclusive Education

Inclusive education emerges as another strong and recurring aspiration among most participants. Those who have had the opportunity to study in mainstream educational settings view it as a transformative experience which not only advances their academic development but also enhances their confidence and ability to engage with broader society. For others who lack such exposure, the desire for inclusive education remains strong, driven by a wider vision of social integration and equality. However, some respondents acknowledge the difficulties of transitioning from the protected environment of special education into the more demanding and often insensitive culture of mainstream schooling. Despite these challenges, the preference for inclusive education is not solely about academics; it encompasses much more. It reflects a more profound desire to dismantle the social identity imposed by segregated schooling and to foster early integration with non-disabled peers. For many, inclusion in mainstream education is seen as a crucial step toward societal acceptance, mutual understanding, and the long-term goal of coexistence on equitable terms. Based on their lived experiences, respondents frame inclusive education not only as an enabler of knowledge but also as a powerful tool for their community to navigate the social challenges.
PWDs often perceive inclusive education as a pathway to a better future and as a catalyst for broader societal change, as reflected in the following excerpt.

> *“If you're not promoting inclusive education, then you're not preparing them for the future. Change must start from the beginning.” (Nadeem, male, visually impaired)*

Nadeem’s statement illuminates the link between inclusive education and future preparedness for PWDs. He asserts that failing to promote inclusive education means failing to prepare disabled individuals for the future. He warns that exclusion at the educational level has long-term consequences. His call for change ‘from the beginning’ reflects a recognition that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved afterwards; rather, it must start from the early stages of education.

Similar views are shared by Rabia, who regards inclusive education as a pathway to coexistence and acceptance within society.

> *“When we and non-disabled children receive education together in the same institution, there will be no need to spread awareness in society about the equal rights of PWDs, or about how to treat us equally. We won’t have to go and lecture people about our existence. We won’t have to run campaigns to make them realise that we also exist in the world. When children study together, they accept each other more easily.” (Rabia, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Mehwish also echoes the views of Rabia and Nadeem. Her views focused more on the participation of PWDs in the future workforce and how inclusive education could help bridge that gap.

> *“You know, we go to separate special-education schools. So, we don’t get exposure to how to interact and work in a mainstream environment. And when we go for a job in a mainstream environment, we’re not able to meet the criteria. We end up lacking understanding due to limited interaction with the mainstream community. But when we study*

> *alongside people without disabilities, it creates a mindset that we will also be part of the workforce in the future, reducing the awareness gap. It's crucial that we learn to coexist with those we'll spend our lives with". (Mehwish, female, visually impaired)*

These narratives indicate that PWDs view inclusive education not merely as an academic concern, but as a powerful mechanism for early social integration and long-term empowerment. Both Rabia and Mehwish highlight how segregated special education isolates PWDs from mainstream society, ultimately depriving them of the early social exposure necessary to build confidence, mutual understanding, and readiness for professional life. The emphasis on 'coexistence' with non-disabled points to a deeper desire for acceptance where PWDs are not viewed as outsiders who must later educate others about their rights and worth in society. The underlying messages in these narratives assert the role of inclusive education in fostering social cohesion by normalising differences. Coexistence and acceptance from early years, envisioned through inclusive education, reflect a desire to dismantle the sources of unfreedom in the social context that restrict the aspirations of PWDs.

7.3.1 Barriers within Inclusive Education

It is pertinent to mention that, despite the strong desire to embrace inclusive education as a tool for social integration, it remains uncertain whether mainstream education in Pakistan has the capacity, resources, and institutional resolve to support it meaningfully. This aspiration continues to face significant challenges, particularly in resource-deprived contexts that also lack disability awareness. The following vignettes convey the complexities and barriers that participants encounter in pursuing inclusive education and how these shape their educational choices.

> *"I attended a special education school for eight years. It was a protective environment. Transitioning to a mainstream school was very challenging – I struggled to adapt, communicate, and make friends. After failing to graduate from there, I completed my matriculation privately." (Adnan, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Fatima, who pursued a law degree and became a disability rights advocate, reflected on her situation:

> *"I was in my first year of medical school when I encountered this life-altering accident that left me wheelchair-bound for life. I had to leave my MBBS degree, considering my situation, that I couldn't be a doctor anymore. I was no longer able to attend classes due to the inaccessibility of the buildings, and I had never seen a doctor in a wheelchair. So, I thought it was no longer for me." (Fatima, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Similarly, Sidra discusses the limitations of educational resources for students with disabilities and how these challenges influenced her own educational choices.

> *"I was passionate about computer science, but I had to make a paradigm shift in my aspirations. I realised that teachers were not aware of how to teach a blind student in a software engineering course. Also, many subjects were not accessible through screen readers. Therefore, I decided to change my field to social sciences." (Sidra, female, visually impaired)*

These narratives reveal how educational aspirations of PWDs are often reshaped not by choice, but by structural and attitudinal barriers embedded in the education system. In each case, the participant begins with a strong academic ambition – whether it is pursuing mainstream schooling, studying medicine, or entering a particular field. However, their aspirations are disrupted by social exclusion, inaccessible infrastructure, and a lack of pedagogical support. These vignettes collectively convey the lack of preparedness within the inclusive education system to accommodate PWDs. Adnan's account highlights the attitudinal barriers he faced during the transition to mainstream education. In contrast, Fatima's narrative is rooted in the inaccessibility of infrastructure, compounded by her sociocultural understanding of the invisibility of disability. Furthermore, Sidra points to the lack of educational resources in mainstream institutions to support students with diverse impairments.

The following government official's perspective further sheds light on the challenges associated with inclusive education in Pakistan.

> *"Policy inconsistency has been one of our greatest obstacles in delivering quality education for children with disabilities. We have shifted repeatedly between integration, segregation, and inclusion – often in response to changing political priorities and lack of funding. For example, the 2002 National Policy reintroduced inclusive education, but by 2006, it was removed from the National Action Plan. Now, under renewed international commitments (UNCRPD), we are once again moving toward inclusion. These constant shifts create uncertainty within implementing departments, slow progress on the ground, and, unfortunately, it is the children with disabilities who bear the consequences." (Stakeholder 7, male, government official)*

The official's statement indicates, while policy documents often express support for inclusive education, the concept is neither clearly defined in federal or provincial legislation nor effectively implemented (See Study Context Section).

The official's remarks also illustrate how the enforcement is undermined when legal and policy commitments change direction. Inadequate and unstable funding indeed suggests a lack of the social resources necessary to convert policy into real opportunities. A lack of this resource leads directly to aspiration deprivation in the form of exclusion from inclusive education.

These findings suggest that the limited educational choices available to PWDs, shaped by the prevailing socio-cultural and institutional context, led them to accept their given situation at different stages of their academic journey. These accounts reflect how diverse contextual factors – both environmental (e.g., inaccessible buildings, screen reader incompatibility) and social (e.g., teacher unawareness, absence of inclusive norms, shifting legislation) – coupled with underfunded public resources, constrain the ability of persons with disabilities to convert educational provisions into real opportunities. Such limitations are sustained by institutional conditions in which weak regulation, limited institutional commitment, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs reinforce systemic deprivation for PWDs.

7.3.2 Concluding Striving for Inclusive Education

The findings provide clear evidence that PWDs' aspirations for inclusive education are closely tied to their broader desire for integration into mainstream society. Interview accounts reflect a strong resistance to being treated differently, with participants emphasising that such treatment often stems from the way institutions, including educational spaces, are organised. Their desire for inclusion was not limited to gaining physical access to classrooms but extended to being part of learning environments that recognised their potential and treated them as equal members of the community. Participants expressed that inclusive education should involve more than logistical arrangements; it should challenge the attitudes, assumptions, and practices that isolate disabled learners. Several saw inclusive education as a pathway toward broader social transformation, noting that learning alongside non-disabled peers helps break down prejudice and normalise diversity. Taken together, these insights show that the desire for inclusive education is not only about equitable learning opportunities but also about meaningful participation in the wider social fabric.

7.4 Transforming Mindsets: The Call for Disability Awareness in Educational Content

The two themes discussed above highlight what PWDs expect from their educational journey – namely, inclusion, equity, and access to quality education. However, their aspirations extend beyond their academic voyage. The majority of participants with disabilities also emphasised the urgency to transform societal attitudes toward disability through education itself. They demanded the integration of disability awareness into the curriculum as a foundational step toward fostering understanding of different disabilities, their diverse needs, and promoting meaningful social inclusion. Participants emphasised that their acceptance within society can be enhanced through structured and intentionally designed educational content that promotes awareness and understanding of disability. They expressed a strong belief that such content should explain the diversity of impairments, dispel common myths, and offer practical guidance on how society can support individuals with disabilities – for them, embedding disability awareness into the mandatory curriculum is essential for fostering a culture of empathy and inclusion.

Sana emphasises the importance of embedding disability awareness content in the curriculum, noting that it can benefit both teachers and students by helping them engage meaningfully with students with disabilities. She asserts:

> *"The subject of disability should be included in the curriculum. It should educate teachers and students on how to treat students with special needs and how to cater to their specific requirements. This will encourage non-disabled students to accept and interact with their disabled peers and help create an inclusive environment in schools for students with disabilities." (Sana, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Sana's narrative draws a connection between disability awareness and attitude shifts within educational settings, which often lack true inclusion, as discussed in the' barriers within inclusive education' subtheme. She recognises that academic institutions tend to reflect broader societal values, and therefore, any desired change in society should begin within these settings. Her account suggests that such awareness not only enhances understanding of diverse types of disabilities but also fosters acceptance among co-learners.

Building on this, the narratives of Salman and Tahir envision the benefits of a disability-related curriculum extending beyond the educational setting, fostering greater understanding and acceptance of disabilities in broader society.

> *"It's crucial to shape the mindset of non-disabled students toward understanding and helping PWDs by imparting awareness through the educational curriculum. It's important to start teaching these values and attitudes from the primary level. This will help non-disabled*

> *students understand that we are not aliens but an integral part of society." (Salman, male, visually impaired)*

> *"I strongly believe that by incorporating topics on disability awareness and inclusion into the education system, students can develop a better understanding of the rights and needs of people with disabilities from an early age. This will foster a more accepting and empathetic society as they grow into adults." (Tahir, male, mobility impaired)*

These narratives reflect the pervasive stigma surrounding disability in the Pakistani society and the strong desire to challenge it through early mindset transformation. Several respondents associated the term mindset with troubling connotations rooted in misinformation, harmful religious interpretations and a general lack of understanding about disability (See Study Context Section). Participants emphasised that such attitudes can be reshaped through structured guidance within educational institutions. Their calls for disability awareness interventions signal a demand for recognition of their rights and needs, which have been significantly lacking in their lived experiences of exclusion. PWDs' call for disability awareness to be embedded in the curriculum directly targets changing the institutional discourse about disability by challenging entrenched myths and stereotypes.

7.4.1 Concluding Transforming Mindsets: The Call for Disability Awareness in Educational Content

The narratives within this theme reflect a call from PWDs for the integration of disability awareness into formal education. Participants envision this as a foundational step toward transforming societal attitudes, dismantling stigma, and fostering empathy from an early age. They consistently expressed the belief that it is often the social environment – rather than their impairments alone – that creates the greatest barriers to inclusion. Many felt that introducing disability-related content in education could help challenge misconceptions, reduce prejudice, and encourage more supportive interactions among peers. Some participants also shared that disability remains largely absent from mainstream curricula, and they hoped for greater representation that could normalise difference and promote understanding. Taken together, these insights highlight the transformative potential of disability-focused educational content in fostering inclusion and driving long-term societal change.

7.5 Concluding Education, Aspiration, and Exclusion: Voices of PWDs

This chapter brings together the lived realities of special education and the expressed desire for inclusive and equitable education, while also highlighting the challenges associated with its implementation. It further explores the call for greater social awareness through the integration of disability-related content into educational curricula. These findings suggest that education is not only viewed by PWDs as a means of acquiring knowledge but also as a critical space for social inclusion and transformation. Ultimately, education is seen as foundational to achieving a *dignified human life* – one in which individuals are recognised, included, and empowered to participate meaningfully in society.

The findings also reveal the disadvantages PWDs experience in accessing the kind of education they value, reflecting constraints that limit their ability to achieve their desired educational and social outcomes. At the same time, participants with disabilities expressed a clear desire to challenge the conditions that restrict them.

By calling for disability awareness within education system and advocating for more inclusive learning environments, they demonstrated a strong orientation toward reshaping the structures that limit their opportunities.

Overall, the findings show that debates about special versus inclusive education cannot be separated from the broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which disabled learners live. Participants' accounts underscore the importance of understanding educational experiences within the realities of their everyday lives, particularly in settings where structural challenges, stigma, and limited resources intersect to shape access, opportunities, and aspirations. These insights bring forward the voices of PWDs in Pakistan, offering a grounded and contextually informed understanding of what inclusive and equitable education means from their perspective.

Chapter Eight: From Aspiration to Action: Self-Led Change for Community Welfare

8.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters on employment and education aspirations reveal the contextual barriers faced by persons with disabilities. The majority of respondents with disabilities were able to reflect on unjust social circumstances critically and expressed a strong desire to participate in societal change. This desire for ‘change’ appears to be a response to the non-conducive living conditions that have historically excluded them from mainstream life domains in Pakistan. Persons with disabilities have shown remarkable resilience and courage in navigating systemic barriers, and they now express an even stronger commitment to becoming agents of change. Despite their own limitations, they strongly support raising awareness and amplifying the voices of others still struggling. All the interviewees with disabilities conveyed a compelling aspiration to induce social transformation for the collective good by reflecting on the injustices they have endured throughout their lives. This chapter, therefore, examines the participants’ aspirations for community welfare and social change. This chapter contributes to answering all three research questions of this study. First, it addresses the question – *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?* – by focusing on their community welfare and empowerment aspirations, and how these shape their work and broader life goals. Second, it engages with the question – *What personal, contextual, and institutional factors enable or hinder the achievement of work and broader life aspirations among persons disabilities in Pakistan?* – by examining how participants reflect on these contextual factors. Third, it answers the question – *What strategies do persons with disabilities employ to navigate contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing their work and life goals?* – by examining how participants highlighted their agentic practices. From the empirical data, three prominent themes emerged as central to their community welfare aspirations: (1) motivations for engaging in community welfare, (2) initiating change: personal efforts toward community welfare and (3) collective efforts for community welfare. The following sections provide a detailed examination of these themes.

8.2 Motivations for Engaging in Community Welfare

The narratives of persons with disabilities reveal deep reflections on the unjust social conditions they have endured, coupled with a shared understanding of the absence of institutional support. This realisation has fuelled a strong sense of responsibility and agency among the participants. PWDs identified a diverse range of motivations underlying their aspiration to work for community welfare. These included frustration with systemic injustice, a desire to reclaim the voice and rights of PWDs, a longing to reconnect with their community, and a determination to challenge able-bodied privilege. Participants also spoke of the pursuit of self-fulfilment, the need to be recognised as valuable contributors to society, and the search for a meaningful purpose in life. Collectively, these motivations underpin their commitment to collective empowerment and social transformation. The following vignettes are shared to illustrate their motivations for engaging in community empowerment.

In addition to working in the corporate sector, Ali also writes blogs in national newspapers, highlighting the issues and challenges faced by his community. He states:

> *"The poor access to health, education, employment, and other social opportunities affects us badly. These things can't be rectified unless someone speaks about them. What I have seen is that most PWDs don't fight for themselves. They need to advocate against unjust behaviour. {...}. I know no one is coming to do this for us. That is why I decided to raise my voice to change the system." (Ali, male, visually impaired)*

The participant, while encapsulating the multifaceted challenges faced by PWDs, expresses concern that most PWDs remain silent in the face of systemic injustices. His statement also critiques institutional failure to prioritise disability issues, thereby reinforcing the invisibility of PWDs in public discourse. He emphasises the need for unity, self-advocacy, and collective action to challenge the system. His example also indicates a growing recognition among PWDs of the need to reclaim agency and take ownership of the issues shaping their lives. Similar sentiments are echoed by Nadeem, who critiques the troubling exclusion of PWDs from decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Nadeem recently (during the time of the interview) transitioned from the corporate sector to the development sector, driven by a desire to effect meaningful change.

> *"Our rights, voices, decision-making abilities, and consent are often disregarded – sometimes even when discussing matters that relate purely to us. People will ask someone else (non-disabled) for their opinion, even if that person is equally uninformed. This is what made me start speaking up about our rights. We need to come together to speak for ourselves." (Nadeem, male, visually impaired)*

In this quote, Nadeem challenges the notion of ‘able-bodied privilege’ in society, where able-bodied individuals are often viewed as more authentic, even when speaking on matters related to disability. He also indirectly points to the societal tendency to conflate physical impairments with mental impairments, reflecting a lack of awareness about the diverse nature of disabilities (See Study Context Section). This confusion contributes to the perception that PWDs are less capable of speaking on issues that concern them, while the opinions of non-disabled individuals are given undue weight. This ongoing marginalisation has motivated Nadeem to advocate for disability rights and highlights the urgent need for a collective voice and self-representation among PWDs.

Some interviewees also expressed feelings of loneliness while struggling with their disabilities and emphasised the importance of being connected to the disability community to experience a sense of belonging and to both give and receive support. Kiran observes:

> *“I felt like I was the only person who had this kind of disability. But once I got connected to the disability cause, I realised I was not alone.” (Kiran, female, wheelchair-bound)*

The views of Kiran illustrate the connection between disability and feelings of alienation within mainstream society. Her sense of alienation emerged from everyday experiences in which she perceived herself as the ‘odd one out’ in a world dominated by ‘normal’ people. Her reflections also point to the limited physical presence of PWDs in public life (mentioned in Study Context Section), shaped by infrastructural barriers that restrict their day-to-day participation. Kiran’s narrative highlights the acute loneliness often experienced by disabled individuals and underscores the need for emotional connection with others who share similar lived experiences. This also reflects how many PWDs, having been historically marginalised and excluded from formal institutional spaces, draw strength and empowerment from relational forms of participation, such as advocacy groups and mutual support networks.

A small number of participants with disabilities also mentioned and critiqued the exploitation of PWDs by non-disabled individuals for personal gain, and emphasised the need for self-representation and community-led support. Bilal, the founder of a disability-led organisation, shares the following views. All employees in his organisation are persons with disabilities, reflecting a model of inclusive and empowering leadership.

> *"You know, non-disabled people used to open institutions in our name, where they were just using us as poster boys to collect charity – more like characters in a tableau. Then, after showcasing us, we were of no use. {…}. Those people just filled their pockets, drove expensive cars, and lived in posh houses after collecting donations in our name. This was the reality. For this reason, we don't want anyone else to become our mouthpiece, as no one understands our needs and limitations better than we do. That's why I decided to do something to support people like me." (Bilal, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Bilal critiques the historical exploitation of PWDs by non-disabled individuals who established institutions in their name, not to serve their needs, but to collect charity and gain personal benefit. The speaker's words should be understood within the context of Pakistan's charity-oriented social approach to disability (see study context). The speaker reflects on how PWDs were objectified and used as symbolic figures to attract donations – only to be discarded afterwards. This statement reveals how different institutional factors work together to normalise the portrayal of PWDs as passive recipients of charity, legitimise such practices under the guise of benevolence, and allow them to persist due to weak oversight. This experience of being instrumentalised without genuine inclusion or empowerment leads to a firm rejection of external representation. The participant asserts the importance of self-representation, emphasising that only those who live with disability truly understand its realities. This reflects how marginalised groups actively find ways to rework their circumstances and resist the social forces that diminish their agency. His decision *to do something to support people like himself* reflects a shift from a victim mindset to active agency. The account reflects the complex ways in which disabled people assert their agency and reject narratives that portray them as passive or helpless. Bilal's words also echo a powerful message within the disability rights movement: decisions about disabled people must include their voices.

A few participants with disabilities also highlighted that contributing to their communities gives them a sense of achievement and self-worth, countering the prevailing image of them as dependent or a burden. The following views are shared by Nabeel, who works in the development sector as an activist, motivational speaker, and founder of a disability welfare organisation.

> *"I believe in guiding those who struggle through phases of life that I once struggled with myself. No one was there to guide me during my years of hardship; therefore, I decided to become part of the development sector. Now, the contribution I make to society satisfies me and makes me feel good about my existence. I am the same person, but now people don't see my disability – they see my contributions." (Nabeel, male, wheelchair-bound)*

The participant articulates a transformative narrative of self-empowerment rooted in lived experience. His decision to enter the development sector emerges from an intrinsic motivation to support others navigating similar hardships. The participant challenges dominant perceptions of disability. While his physical condition remains unchanged, his social identity has been redefined through meaningful participation. This shift contests the prevailing view of PWDs as dependent and instead highlights their potential as active contributors.

The majority of participants with disabilities described religion as a significant source of inner strength that not only gave them the will to endure life's challenges but also instilled a deep sense of moral responsibility toward others. For many, religion functioned not merely as a coping mechanism but as a sustaining force that shaped their sense of agency and social purpose. The following views of Junaid express this aspect:

> *"God (Allah in Urdu) has provided me with the opportunity to serve humanity and help others lead better lives. Had I not been disabled, I would not have been able to dedicate myself to the welfare of disabled people. I consider myself fortunate to be disabled – I am the chosen one." (Junaid, male, wheelchair-bound)*

The participant frames his disability not as a limitation but as a divine opportunity for service and moral action. His assertion that he would not have dedicated himself to the welfare of disabled people had he not been disabled himself reveals a deeply spiritual reframing of impairment, transforming a potentially marginalised condition into a meaningful purpose. His narrative also illustrates how faith functions as a powerful internal resource – offering strength to endure personal hardship while simultaneously instilling a sense of obligation to support others.

His statement not only rejects deficit-based narratives but also affirms a spiritually empowered identity anchored in purpose. This account also reflects a broader pattern in the study, wherein majority of the participants with disabilities viewed religion (faith) as a key internal resource that enabled them to navigate structural and personal barriers, while also instilling a moral purpose to support the disabled community.

8.2.1 Concluding Motivations for Engaging in Community Welfare

The above examples demonstrate that interviewees were not only aware of their social realities but also expressed a deep desire to improve them. Their narratives reflect an agency that encompasses both objective and subjective dimensions, suggesting that human action is shaped by circumstances as well as by individual reasoning and meaning-making. The participants’ narratives reveal a strong sense of self-direction, self-determination, and active participation – core dimensions of empowerment reflected in their experiences. Participants demonstrated a clear capacity to critically examine the social conditions that limit their inclusion, revealing an emerging awareness of the forces that marginalise them and a commitment to transforming those realities. These accounts also reveal how participants looked beyond the constraints of their everyday routines and imagined alternative, more equitable futures for themselves. In expressing these aspirations, PWDs present themselves as active agents, engaged in intentional and transformative efforts to improve their circumstances and contribute to the wellbeing of their community.

This section has established the motivations driving PWDs' engagement in community welfare. The following section will build on this by exploring the concrete actions and individual efforts they undertake in pursuit of that collective well-being.

8.3 Initiating Change: Personal Efforts Toward Community Welfare

Having recognised the structural inequalities that hinder the full inclusion of PWDs, many participants moved beyond reflection to actively engage in efforts aimed at improving the conditions of their communities. The following accounts highlight the diverse and meaningful ways in which these PWDs are initiating change at the grassroots level. Drawing on their own lived experiences, participants with disabilities have engaged in a range of self-directed efforts – from legal advocacy and digital training to community-based counselling and skills development for other disabled individuals. These personal initiatives, often undertaken without institutional support or financial gain, reflect a deep sense of responsibility, solidarity, and moral purpose. Whether through social media activism, informal education, or direct service, these PWDs are not only addressing the immediate needs of their communities but are also challenging dominant narratives of dependency by positioning themselves as capable agents. By initiating change from within, these participants demonstrate how personal agency can serve as a powerful starting point for wider social transformation.

The following excerpts illustrate the various ways in which PWDs have taken initiative to support and empower others facing similar challenges.

> *“Soon after completing my studies, I began actively volunteering my time to assist individuals with disabilities by collaborating with various organisations working for disabled people. Additionally, I have been involved in private welfare work, helping individuals obtain wheelchair donations from Bait-ul-Maal (Government Treasury Department). To date, I have helped nearly 20 individuals receive wheelchairs, enabling them to improve their mobility.” (Sana, female, wheelchair-bound)*

This account reflects the participant’s transition from personal development to social commitment. She draws on her education to assist other PWDs in navigating bureaucratic procedures. Her reference to individuals receiving support from the government treasury suggests that they come from low socio-economic backgrounds, which are often characterised by limited literacy and a lack of awareness about their rights and entitlements. Drawing on contextual understanding, it is recognised that these bureaucratic procedures can be highly complex, making it extremely difficult for individuals from low-literacy or marginalised backgrounds to access the support to which they are entitled. Therefore, she offers support to individuals in navigating these procedural hurdles. Her narrative illustrates how personal capacity can translate into grassroots action aimed at dismantling structural barriers.

Rabia, who is working with an NGO, shares the nature of her work. Although she is engaged in this role in an official capacity, she reiterated that her motivation is deeply personal. She explained that she had always wanted to support women like herself, which is why she chose to work in the development sector rather than the corporate sector. She shares her views:

> *"I find women with disabilities and bring them out of their houses. I counsel and train them, helping them become independent. I try to empower them. I find my work very valuable because it is based on the rights of women with disabilities. I motivate them by saying that if I can do this, they too can do everything in this hyper-masculine culture – they are not weak, and they can achieve anything in the world." (Rabia, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Rabia's statement, in which she describes seeking out women with disabilities and bringing them out of their homes, sheds light on a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture. When this intersects with disability, it often confines women to the private sphere for a lifetime. Her narrative highlights the gendered dimensions of disability, which are frequently overlooked. The challenges faced by women with disabilities are rarely separated from those experienced by men with impairments, obscuring the unique forms of marginalisation that emerge when ableism and sexism intersect. Although an NGO employs Rabia, her efforts extend far beyond her formal responsibilities. She mentors women with disabilities in life skills, drawing from her own experiences to empower others. By physically and symbolically "*bringing them out of their houses*", Rabia actively resists cultural norms that restrict women with disabilities to invisibility and dependency. Through counselling, training, and motivational support – and by showcasing her own resilience – she positions herself not only as a role model but also as a catalyst for transformation. Her actions enable other women to imagine and pursue lives beyond the limitations imposed by both gender and disability.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Zara, who works in the development sector and goes beyond her official responsibilities to support women with disabilities from remote areas of the country. She stated:

> *“My passion for this work stems from a deep-seated desire to address the issues faced by women like me. I continue to search for ways to make a positive impact in any way possible. I recently managed to provide a platform for disabled women from a few remote villages to showcase their skills in embroidery, stitching, or other handicrafts, and have their names associated with these skills. I wanted to show them a path to earning, thereby enabling them to earn a living, contribute to their families, and live with respect and purpose.” (Zara, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Zara expresses a deep sense of empathy in her account. Her motivation stems from this empathy for other women with disabilities, whose challenges she understands firsthand. Having experienced the transformative impact of financial empowerment in her own life, she now seeks to offer alternative opportunities to women who are unable to access employment due to their circumstances. As discussed in the study context section, the infrastructural situation in the country – particularly in remote areas – significantly limits employment opportunities for both women and men with disabilities. Zara is aware of the inverse relationship between financial empowerment and gender inequality, and she is determined to address it. Although her work is situated within a community-oriented organisation (NGO), her initiative suggests a level of individual agency that appears to extend the boundaries of her formal role. Her actions indicate not only a commitment to organisational goals but also a personal drive that may be shaping those goals in new ways. By creating a platform for women with disabilities to showcase their entrepreneurial skills, she is not only supporting clients but potentially expanding the scope of her organisation’s outreach. This suggests a dynamic interaction between individual and institutional agency, where the organisation might also be learning from her approach and integrating elements of it into its own practice. Individuals like Zara – though embedded within institutional frameworks – can exercise agency that reshapes those very structures through their own practices. Furthermore, Zara understands that financial contribution not only improves a woman’s status in society but, more importantly, reshapes her position within her own family. Therefore, she introduces other women to this experience and helps shift the institutional discourse from the margins of dependency to positions of self-sufficiency and social participation. Her initiative represents an effort of grassroots empowerment – one that responds directly to structural exclusion while advancing dignity and inclusion.

Usman, a visually impaired individual with difficult personal experiences in the job market (discussed in Chapter 5), reflects on the employment-related challenges faced by persons with visual impairments and outlines his efforts to support others in overcoming these barriers.

> *“I am aware of how hard it is to get a job here. Therefore, I thought to teach people how to earn online. I am doing this through my WhatsApp group. Currently, I am guiding 50 visually impaired individuals by training them for online earning, without charging them any commission. They usually earn around Rs. 1500–2000 (in Pakistani currency) daily with respect. I do this without expecting any monetary reward, but as a means of doing good deeds”. (Usman, male, visually impaired)*

Usman’s narrative reflects a response to the structural barriers that visually impaired individuals face in accessing employment. Drawing from his own experiences, he has created an informal yet impactful initiative through an online platform, where he trains visually impaired individuals without any personal financial benefit. His choice to highlight that these individuals earn ‘respectfully’ is particularly important here. In the broader socio-economic and cultural context of Pakistan, disability is often concentrated in families with minimal financial means, where the burden of care is difficult to sustain (See Study Context Section). In many such cases, begging becomes the only visible option for PWDs' survival. Drawing from his own undignified experiences in the workplace and his understanding of how people with disabilities are often forced to beg, Usman takes pride in providing others with a means to earn their livelihood with self-respect. By equipping others with the skills and confidence to earn independently, he enables them to move away from dependency and toward self-reliance. In doing so, Usman’s actions represent a grassroots form of empowerment that challenges exclusion and opens new possibilities for economic participation. Usman’s actions expand the agency of others by enabling them to achieve what they have reason to value – such as earning a livelihood with dignity.

The following excerpt sheds light on the role of Fatima, a social and legal activist actively pursuing a legal case while simultaneously working to promote greater awareness of disability-related issues within the national context. She highlights:

> *“After encountering the fatal accident that left me paralysed, I realised the hardships they (PWDs) face every day. I have a law degree, so I thought I should do something to demand accessibility for people like me. My petition, PLD 2022 Lahore 346, titled Fatima vs Government of Punjab, resulted in summoning the development authorities of Lahore (a city in Pakistan) to submit a compliance report on their accessibility regulations. It was my success. I also decided to talk about disability and related issues in our culture on TV channels regularly. I raise awareness through my Instagram account as well. However, I believe that my litmus test for change is this: the day you*

> *see a person with a disability in a classroom, at your place of employment, or in a public space – without noticing it as a novelty – will be the day I can sleep better at night.” (Fatima, female, wheelchair-bound)*

Fatima presents a classic example of disability activism rooted in both personal experience and professional expertise. After a life-changing accident that left her paralysed, she developed a deep understanding of the everyday hardships faced by PWDs. Rather than accepting the limitations imposed by her condition, she chose to act. In her professional capacity as a lawyer, Fatima is actively pursuing legal action to address inaccessibility in public infrastructure. This is exemplified by her petition (PLD 2022 Lahore 346), which compelled local authorities to submit a compliance report on accessibility regulations. This also underscores how participants saw themselves as the driving force behind their achievements, actively working toward the goals they valued. In this view, individuals are not merely passive recipients of change but active agents who shape their own outcomes through purposeful action. This legal activism indicates her efforts to demand institutional accountability and systemic change. However, her efforts extend well beyond the legal sphere. She is equally committed to challenging the deep-rooted stereotypes associated with disability in Pakistani society. Dissatisfied with the prevailing ignorance surrounding disability, she uses her influential presence on social media and her regular appearances on television talk shows to raise public awareness. For Fatima, the judiciary and media serve as pathways to bring about social change. Her efforts operate across formal structures and public mindsets: on one hand, she engages with legal processes to advocate for stronger protections, and on the other, she uses media platforms to challenge and reshape public perceptions of disability.

Similar sentiments are expressed by Mariam, who is determined to empower the deaf and mute community. She explains:

> *"Literally no one talks about us. {...}. I now have an Instagram page where I post content and provide support for individuals who are deaf and mute. Not only do deaf and mute individuals follow my account, but hearing people also follow it. They learn about our challenges and gain information about sign language. I am passionate about using my platform to raise awareness and empower others in the deaf and mute community." (Mariam, female, hearing and speech impaired)*

Mariam's narrative highlights the sense of invisibility and exclusion often experienced by the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Her statement, "*literally no one talks about us*," reflects a wider social neglect of the needs and identities of people with hearing and speech impairments. Her words also reflect how identity politics within disability movements can sometimes privilege certain well-recognised impairment groups, such as wheelchair users, while further marginalising those with less visible or less socially acknowledged impairments. Mariam's narrative directly sheds light on this often-overlooked issue. In response to this silence, Mariam takes proactive steps to create space and visibility through social media. By launching and managing her own social media account, she demonstrates a strong sense of agency and self-representation. She uses her platform not only to support others within the deaf and hard-of-hearing community but also to educate hearing individuals about the challenges her community faces and to raise awareness of sign language. Through her efforts, she works to dismantle the barriers that restrict people with hearing and speech impairments from pursuing their goals and living the kinds of lives they aspire to.

The above-discussed examples illustrate agentic practices aimed at supporting others. In some cases, these actions are primarily driven by concern for the well-being of others and do not appear to improve the actors' own well-being directly. For instance, Sana assists individuals in accessing government funds for wheelchair support – an effort she undertakes alongside her own job and without any material benefit to herself. Similarly, Usman devotes his time and resources to training visually impaired individuals in online earning and explicitly states that he takes no commission for his support. In these cases, the participants' agency enhances the lives of others, but not necessarily their own well-being.

In contrast to earlier examples, participants like Rabia, Zara, Fatima, and Mariam demonstrate forms of agency that simultaneously support others and contribute to their own well-being. For instance, Rabia and Zara carry out their community empowerment efforts within their professional roles. While their actions enhance agency of other disabled women, they also foster their own well-being – both in terms of personal fulfilment and possibly improving their standing within their organisations due to their dedication. Similarly, Fatima's legal activism aligns with both her personal goals and broader communal objectives. Her work – filing legal petitions for accessible infrastructure and raising awareness through TV appearances and social media – serves to challenge systemic exclusion while also enhancing her own well-being. Her growing public visibility and influence reflect a form of well-being achievement.

8.3.1 Concluding Initiating Change: Personal Efforts Toward Community Welfare

The examples discussed in this theme reveal that PWDs are active contributors to their community transformation. Their personal efforts – whether through legal action, digital outreach, professional roles, or voluntary initiatives – demonstrate diverse expressions of agency. Collectively, these accounts underscore the critical role of individual initiatives in challenging structural exclusions and initiating grassroots change.

Having explored how individual PWDs initiate change through personal efforts, the following section examines these efforts from a collective perspective, highlighting how shared struggles and aspirations often give rise to collaborative action and contribute to transforming the institutional landscape.

8.4 Collective Efforts for Community Welfare

Building on the sincere individual efforts of PWDs to bring about change, this section shifts the focus to the emergence of more organised, collaborative, and structured initiatives led by PWDs themselves. While individual agency remains significant, these examples illustrate how some participants moved beyond personal action to become central drivers of collective transformation. Their efforts have evolved into grassroots disability organisations – initiated and managed by PWDs to serve their communities. Out of the 32 interviews conducted with PWDs, seven participants reported having co-founded such organisations alongside their peers. These initiatives provide support, advocacy, and guidance to others with disabilities, reflecting both solidarity and a shared commitment to dismantling systemic barriers. The movement from personal efforts to collective mobilisation demonstrates how PWDs are claiming space, voice, and recognition within Pakistani society. By organising themselves around the disability cause, they are not only resisting long-standing discrimination but also addressing the absence of institutional support. These accounts are the powerful manifestation of “Nothing about us without us” . The following vignettes provide a snapshot of how these individuals came together to establish their own self-support networks.

Adnan is now serving as the CEO of one of the first disability welfare organisations in Pakistan. He reflected on this journey:

> *“In schools, they used to showcase our disabilities to collect funds, and we despised being treated like showpieces – like animals in a circus. We didn’t deserve to be treated that way. During my educational journey, I became part of a group of PWDs. We had a rebellious mindset. We all loved outdoor sports, which created strong bonds and interaction among us. But we felt that people made fun of us and showed hatred toward us. Our parents lacked awareness, and we had no guidance available to us. We also had this thought that parents should be educated enough that they shouldn't invest so much in fixing the impairment. Rather, they should invest in the education and learning of their disabled child so that they can progress in their life. These mutual experiences and beliefs helped us form a team, which eventually grew into an organisation for PWDs. We initiated it as a movement (in our area) for PWDs and later evolved into a formal organisation.” (Adnan, male, wheelchair-bound).*

Adnan’s account reflects how shared experiences of exclusion, stigma, and marginalisation became the foundation for collective consciousness and organised resistance. He reckons this as a ‘rebellious’ mindset – one that refused to accept the norms set by others and chose not to surrender to fate. Adnan found solidarity in a group of peers with similar experiences. This cohort recognised that the root problem was not just the impairment, but the social structures – parental ignorance, lack of guidance, and societal attitudes – that restricted their potential. He acknowledges that this was a shared mindset among him and his fellow

PWDs. The evolution of their group into a formal organisation highlights the transition from what began as informal mutual support to an organised platform for change. This example illustrates how vulnerable groups – such as marginalised youth – can drive social change from the grassroots level through collective effort, resilience and determination.

Nabeel, who previously worked in the corporate sector, decided to dedicate his life to the development sector. Together with his friends, he established an organisation that provides assistive devices for mobility, offers peer counselling, and promotes the concept of independent living. He reflected on this journey:

> *"We started this organisation as an 'inclusive student society' to support each other during our educational journey when we were students. Later, we transformed it into a formal organisation. Our religion teaches us that God helps those who help themselves, so we decided to help ourselves. This belief strengthened our mission. Our organisation provides a range of services aimed at supporting PWDs and their families. We offer counselling services, distribute assistive devices in collaboration with external funding partners, and provide guidance on various social and legal matters. Additionally, we work with institutions to raise awareness and promote disability-inclusive practices, helping them become more accessible and supportive of PWDs." (Nabeel, male, wheelchair-bound)*

As a contextual insider, the researcher recognises that this participant's statement reflects a well-known Islamic teaching rooted in the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book): *"Indeed, Allah would never change a people's state of favour until they change their own state of faith and actions"* (Qur'an 13:11). This verse emphasises that divine favour is conditional upon human effort, which helps explain why participants framed their collective initiative as "helping themselves" through organised action. This teaching asserts a direct link between divine intervention and human agency, emphasising that individual and collective efforts are a prerequisite for divine support. The successful journey of Nabeel illustrates this principle in practice: a group of students with disabilities came together to address the everyday challenges they encountered collectively. Over time, they began to recognise the power of collective effort and gradually shaped their actions into a shared mission. This transformation – from a small self-help group to a more structured organisation – was grounded in a mission that was mutually agreed upon and faithfully upheld by the group. Nabeel, now their representative, expresses pride in their accomplishments and is even more determined to expand the scope of their self-help organisation across the country. Their journey highlights how collective agency can emerge from shared lived experiences, particularly when guided by moral and spiritual conviction. Their work with mainstream institutions to promote disability-inclusive practices highlights their efforts in reshaping broader societal attitudes and systems, reinforcing their position as both beneficiaries and agents of change.

Similar thoughts are shared by Bilal, who is serving as the CEO of a Sindh-based (a province in Pakistan) disability welfare organisation. Bilal's organisation has also received official recognition from the Government of Pakistan for its efforts in supporting the cause of disability. He highlighted the significance of self-help and how it has begun to bring changes to the country's landscape.

> *"I joined forces with people like me (disabled) who shared the same vision. We then stood up. We launched a campaign at the social level and raised our voices. As a result, several changes have taken place for people with disabilities in Sindh over the past four years. Our organisation also played an instrumental role in the passage of the*

> *Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, by the Sindh Assembly. The new law addresses areas such as political participation of persons with disabilities, equity in education and employment, equality before the law, ease of access and mobility, and protection from violent, abusive, intolerant, and discriminatory behaviour. It took us 25 years to reach this level, and we are not going to stop." (Bilal, male, wheelchair-bound)*

Bilal's account reflects a long-standing commitment to disability rights. By joining forces with like-minded individuals, he helped transform personal struggles into collective action, leading to meaningful legal and social reforms. His organisation's role in the passage of the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018, exemplifies how grassroots mobilisation can influence legislative change. His words underscore the transformative power of collective action among those positioned at the margins of society. What may seem unattainable in isolation becomes possible through united and sustained efforts toward a shared cause. Bilal, Adnan and Nabeel vignettes illustrate how shared vision, resilience, and collaboration can lead to impactful outcomes.

Most NGO representatives also commended the role of these 'self-led' organisations, noting that:

> *"These organisations are quite effective because they are directly connected to their communities. People (PWDs) often place greater trust in them than in us." (Stakeholder 8, male, NGO representative)*

A human rights lawyer emphasised the efforts of these organisations, observing that:

> *"If you look at the recent changes in the legal landscape regarding disability, they have largely been the result of pressure exerted jointly*

> *by OPDs on government machinery." (Stakeholder 9, male, human rights lawyer)*

These observation underscores a key strength of self-led organisations: their deep-rooted connection to the communities they belong to and serve. Because they are formed and run by PWDs themselves, these organisations possess an authenticity and lived understanding that external actors often lack. This insider status fosters trust, enabling them to deliver contextually relevant solutions and to mobilise collective action. In this way, their legitimacy and unity translate into advocacy power, enabling these organisations to exert pressure on state institutions collectively. Such organisations are emerging as fertile contextual enablers that help transform available resources – whether information, skills, or networks – into real opportunities for PWDs.

8.4.2 Concluding Remarks on Collective Efforts for Community Welfare

The narratives of Bilal, Adnan, and Nabeel illustrate a powerful expression of collective agency among persons with disabilities. Participants described how acting together enabled them to pursue goals that extended beyond their individual needs, contributing to the wellbeing of their wider community. These accounts also show how agency is shaped by social and historical contexts, influencing how people interpret their actions and the purposes they serve. Omar's story further demonstrates how collective efforts among PWDs can generate meaningful and lasting change, even within environments marked by limited resources and political marginalisation. Such grassroots initiatives do not operate in isolation. They develop within broader institutional settings where different actors, interests, and power relations interact, shaping what is possible. In some cases, these PWD-led groups are themselves becoming influential collectives, capable of challenging existing arrangements by shaping public opinion, engaging with policy processes, and influencing organisational practices. Through their collective mobilisation, these groups have emerged as important enablers of change, helping to expand opportunities, promote dignity, and strengthen social inclusion. Despite the challenges they face, participants' accounts suggest that collective action remains one of the most effective pathways for improving their conditions and advancing the freedoms they aspire to.

8.5 Concluding Remarks on Aspiration to Action: Self-Led Change for Community Welfare

This chapter explored in depth the manifestation of agency grounded in critical reflection on unjust conditions, highlighting the transition from isolated efforts to collective action in addressing these challenges. The narratives of participants demonstrate that when individuals come together around a shared purpose, they can challenge institutional structures, reclaim their dignity, and expand their real freedoms.

These individual and collective efforts dismantle barriers that restrict participation of PWDs and generate new enabling resources that enhance both individual and community well-being. They show how empowerment can emerge from the bottom up, even in contexts marked by marginalisation. The findings also highlight how people in collectivist societies like Pakistan place significant value on community and collective well-being, and how shared struggles often deepen commitments to mutual support.

Participants’ accounts further illustrate the transformative potential of self-led groups and community-based organisations, which not only support individuals but also work to influence public attitudes, organisational practices, and policy environments. These efforts illustrate how collective initiatives can drive meaningful change and open new possibilities for social inclusion.

At the heart of these actions is a shared aspiration to achieve a dignified life – one defined by autonomy, recognition, and the freedom to participate fully in society. Ultimately, this chapter shows that a collective struggle for dignity and justice underpins the aspirations for welfare and empowerment expressed by persons with disabilities.

Chapter Nine: Discussion

9.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reflects on the key findings of this study, positioning them within the broader theoretical framework and empirical debates. The aspirations of persons with disabilities, drawn from diverse spheres of life, converge on a powerful vision of an inclusive society – one that upholds respect, equitable opportunity, and the valued contribution of all, enabling them to lead a life worthy of human dignity. While participants articulated a broad and diverse set of aspirations – spanning both the personal and social domains – these tended to converge around two overarching capabilities: *equitable inclusion* and *community contribution*. These capabilities emerged as central to their vision of a dignified human life, connecting various dimensions of well-being. Not only do they cut across multiple domains of life, but they are also seen by participants with disabilities as foundational to achieving a dignified human life. Moreover, these capabilities provide a strong basis for deeper conceptual engagement with the Capability Approach. The findings illuminate not only the substance of these capabilities but also the complex interplay of personal, contextual, and institutional factors that shape, constrain, or enable their achievement. Structural constraints – rooted in societal and institutional dynamics – continue to restrict the translation of PWD’s aspirations into real capabilities. At the same time, this study highlights key enabling factors that sustain resilience and agency in the face of persistent challenges. The findings also reveal the multifaceted ways in which PWDs exercise agency. In particular, they underscore the critical role of collective agency – not only in resisting deep-seated structural barriers, but also in generating social and institutional resources that create enabling conditions, thereby laying the groundwork for the expansion of real capabilities. This discussion highlights the intricate interconnections between capabilities, social structures, and the dynamics of agency.

To investigate the phenomenon under study, the following empirical research questions have been developed.

9.1.1 Empirical Research Questions:

Question 1: *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?*

Question 2: *What personal, contextual, and institutional factors enable or hinder the achievement of work and broader life aspirations among persons disabilities in Pakistan?*

Question 3: *What strategies do persons with disabilities employ to navigate contextual and institutional barriers in pursuing their work and life goals?*

In addition to these, the study also engages with the following conceptual research question.

9.1.2 Conceptual Research Question:

Question 4: *How can empirical insights into the aspirations and lived experiences of persons with disabilities inform and extend the theoretical application of the Capability Approach in disability research?*

The conceptual question is not addressed in a separate section but is interwoven throughout the discussion. Theoretical reflections are integrated with the analysis of empirical findings to examine how the Capability Approach both informs and is informed by this study.

The following sections engage with each of the empirical research questions individually, accompanied by an exploration of their implications and contributions.

9.2 Aspirations of Persons with Disabilities

The empirical evidence presented across the three findings chapters highlights the diverse aspirations of PWDs in the domains of employment, education, and community welfare, which intersect with and inform their broader life aspirations.

The employment aspirations of persons with disabilities, as presented in Chapter Six, reveal a shared desire for work conditions that extend well beyond mere access to a job. Participants consistently emphasised aspirations for freedom from hiring and post-hiring discrimination, availability of reasonable workplace accommodations, and a sense of inclusion, respect, and belonging. These aspirations resonate strongly with the Capability Approach, which argues that the mere presence of employment opportunities is insufficient for human well-being; instead, it foregrounds the importance of substantive opportunities to engage in meaningful, dignified, and fulfilling work (Bueno, 2022; Laruffa, 2020; Nussbaum, 2000). A key insight from the employment empirical findings is the distinction between two forms of disadvantage (Sen, 2000, p. 12) experienced by PWDs in Pakistan. First, unfavourable exclusion, where individuals are denied access to employment entirely. Second, unfavourable inclusion, where individuals technically obtain employment but under conditions that restrict their capability to realise meaningful and dignified work (Miles, 2014). Such patterns illustrate how systemic and organisational constraints impede capability enhancement even when individuals are formally “included.” The constraints identified in the employment findings – such as disability discrimination, lack of accommodations, limited career progression, inequitable remuneration and disability-related pay gaps, and absence of inclusion, respect, and belonging – align with wider disability and work literature (Aksnes and Ulstein, 2024; Jurado-Caraballo et al., 2022; Østerud, 2023; Schur et al., 2017; Vornholt et al., 2018). However, most of this scholarship has emerged from developed countries where accessibility and legal enforcement of disability rights are comparatively advanced (Schur et al., 2017; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). Scholars have criticised the dominance of research from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) contexts, noting that it inadequately captures the more complex socio-economic, cultural, and institutional constraints that shape the working lives of PWDs in resource-constrained settings (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015; Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023). By foregrounding the lived experiences of PWDs in Pakistan, this study enriches the emerging body of research examining disability and employment in the Global South (Chhabra, 2021; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). It demonstrates how institutional, socio-cultural, and organisational constraints interact to limit the capability for meaningful work – offering a much-needed contextualised perspective to an otherwise Northern-dominated field. Taken together, these findings reveal the *undignified and capability-depriving* conditions under which many PWDs work, underscoring their aspirations for equitable inclusion, respect, and dignity in work/employment and broader life.

Turning to the education domain, findings presented in Chapter Seven indicate that PWDs strongly aspire to inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education. Participants with disabilities conceptualised inclusive education as a pathway to an inclusive society – one that values diversity, fosters mutual respect, and provides equal opportunities. In contrast, the limitations of special education illustrate how segregated systems fail to equip learners with the academic foundations, social networks, and confidence needed to pursue their aspirations (Booth and Ainscow, 1998). This tension reflects what Terzi (2005a) terms the 'dilemma of difference', wherein institutional practices designed to support vulnerable groups simultaneously risk reproducing their marginalisation. Within the Capability Approach, such practices constrain the capability for educational development by offering "access" without expanding genuine opportunities for participation, learning, and future functioning (Norwich, 2014). Shakespeare (2006) and Campbell (2009) contend that segregated education reproduces ableist assumptions and entrenches exclusionary norms. The narratives of participants in this study reflect these dynamics, illustrating how special schooling environments can inadvertently hinder social integration and reinforce societal stigma leading to their deprivation to have inclusion in the society (Alzahrani, 2020). By emphasising belonging and mutual respect, participants' views underscore the significance of inclusive education not only for academic development but also for cultivating broader capabilities related to dignity, participation, and community life (Broderick, 2018; Ghosh, 2021). Overall, these findings from education domain contribute to the ongoing global debate on the relative merits of special versus inclusive education (Florian, 2008; Imray and Colley, 2017). Crucially, they respond to Grech's (2015) call to ground understandings of inclusive education within local, Global South contexts. Rather than uncritically applying Northern models – an issue highlighted by Kamenopoulou and Karisa (2023) – participants' accounts emphasise the need for reforms that are culturally meaningful, contextually responsive, and reflective of the lived realities of PWDs in Pakistan.

Similarly, Chapter Eight illustrates the underlying aspirations that drive PWDs to come forward and reclaim their space in society. The systemic shortcomings – manifested through exclusion, stigma, and limited institutional responsiveness – have not only shaped their lived experiences but have also become powerful catalysts for action. Instead of internalising or accepting these constraints, participants described how these injustices motivate them to challenge dominant norms, raise awareness, and work collectively to transform their communities. This aligns with Goodley's (2005) observation that PWDs, having been historically marginalised and excluded from formal institutional spaces, often draw strength and empowerment from relational modes of participation, such as advocacy groups and mutual support networks. By foregrounding the proactive efforts of PWDs in Pakistan, the findings offer an important counter-narrative to mainstream disability literature, which still tends to conceptualise participation through top-down, interventionist approaches (Chawa et al., 2021).

To summarise the core findings of this study, the employment aspirations of PWDs reflect a desire for equitable treatment, respect, and social belonging. Similarly, their educational aspirations highlight a need for inclusive pedagogies and the integration of disability awareness into curricula. Likewise, the community welfare narratives indicate that PWDs aspire to support members of their community in co-constructing spaces of empowerment within society. The quest for community building is an act of claiming their place through empowerment and community contribution. Together, these aspirations reflect a deep yearning for a society that genuinely values their diversity, agency and integrates them with dignity. When viewed holistically, these aspirations encapsulate the broader pursuit of a meta-capability to lead a *dignified human life*, realised through *equitable inclusion* and *community contribution* within Pakistan's context.

Collectively, these findings from the three empirical chapters address the first research question – *What are the work and broader life aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan?* – and reveal overarching aspirations for 'equitable inclusion' and meaningful 'community contribution', both of which are envisioned as essential for leading a 'dignified human life'. In the context of this study, a dignified human life refers to the capability to live with self-respect, autonomy, and recognition, free from humiliation, and with one's fundamental rights and needs met.

The aspirations expressed by persons with disabilities provide an entry point for engaging with the foundational concerns of the Capability Approach – namely, what people value in life and what they are able to achieve (Sen, 1985, 1993, 1999). This is the space in which well-being, in terms of capabilities, is assessed within the Capability Approach framework. This marks a profound shift – from asking what kind of rehabilitation is needed (medical model) or what social adjustments are required (social model), to asking a deeper question: What do individuals genuinely value in their lives? This perspective is rooted in the

Capability Approach (Sen, 1985, 1993, 1999, 2009). This is where the Capability Approach stands out from other models of disability, offering an analytical framework that is more sensitive to the needs, values, and perspectives of PWDs. As noted by Trani and colleagues (2011), the medical model, the social model, and the World Health Organisation's (2001) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) fail to fully capture the choices, aspirations, and goals of disabled people. This omission risks neglecting their lived experiences and devaluing their agency. By engaging with the Capability Approach, this research contributes to both the general disability literature and the Capability Approach-based disability literature, which remains scarce in relation to the aspirations of PWDs for a dignified life (Ryan and O'Brien, 2024).

The following sections explore how the capabilities of PWDs for *equitable inclusion* and *community contribution* serve as pathways to achieving a dignified human life, how these align with and extend the core tenets of the Capability Approach, and how they are further examined within the evolving disability and non-disability literature related to the CA.

9.2.1 Capability for Equitable Inclusion

The capability for equitable inclusion is understood in this study as the genuine opportunity for PWDs to have their unique experiences and needs acknowledged, accommodated, and respected, enabling meaningful participation in personal, social, economic, and institutional life. Here, equitable inclusion goes beyond mere access or presence. This capability is an institutional responsibility to provide equitable inclusion to the PWDs. The capability for equitable inclusion also serves as a pathway to a broader capability to lead a dignified human life. Thus, he capability of equitable inclusion provides a valuable lens for examining the tension between available social resources and the aspiration to lead a dignified human life.

The aspiration of PWDs in this research to achieve equitable inclusion in society echoes the central tenet of the Capability Approach that genuine participation in valued life domains is a key marker of well-being (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). This aspiration also resonates with the long-standing emphasis on equitable inclusion within the international disabled people’s movement, which has been a central demand in the struggle for disability rights and social justice (Finkelstein, 1991; Oliver, 1990). The aspiration to have equitable inclusion is strongly reflected in the findings. For instance, in Sections 7.2 and 7.3, Saad and Rabia emphasise the right to receive the same inclusive and quality education as non-disabled peers, reflecting international evidence that inclusive education fosters both academic achievement and social inclusion for PWDs (UNESCO 2020). Sana’s call for inclusive environments in Section 7.2 aligns with research indicating that segregated services for PWDs are a significant factor in perpetuating negative stereotypes and stigma, and in fostering their social exclusion (Scior et al., 2015). Likewise, in Section 7.4, Salman’s aspiration to be recognised as an integral member of society, and Bilal’s desire in Section 6.2.1 to be considered equal in society, reflect the core principles of the UNCRPD (2006). Nadeem’s argument in Section 6.3.1 – that remuneration should account for additional disability-related expenses – reflects a growing debate in disability research on the need to address the disability pay gap (Kruse et al., 2018). Nadeem’s view strongly aligns with the core argument of the Capability Approach that individuals with different circumstances may require different resources to achieve comparable freedoms and well-being (Sen, 1999, 2009). Kiran’s assertion in Section 6.4.1 that “*PWDs require the right conditions to thrive*” further illustrates that inclusion must be responsive to their diverse needs in order to enable them to flourish. Across these diverse domains – education, workplace participation, societal recognition, remuneration and social conditions – participants articulate not just a demand for formal equality, but for conditions that acknowledge and address their distinct circumstances, encapsulating the essence of equitable inclusion. This capability resonates closely with the broader human rights framework of disability (Degener, 2016). This capability further deepens the agenda of UNCRPD (2006). The UNCRPD promotes ‘equality of opportunity’ as a foundation for disability inclusion. However, the findings of this study indicate that in contexts such as Pakistan, formal equality – providing the same opportunities to all – does not translate into substantive inclusion. Equality assumes the existence of a level playing field, yet participants’ accounts reveal persistent disparities in education, mobility, infrastructure, social attitudes, and access to institutional support. These structural disadvantages mean that persons with disabilities do not begin from the same starting point as their non-disabled counterparts. For this reason, the concept of *equitable opportunities* becomes more appropriate for understanding and addressing disability inclusion in the Pakistani context. Thus, the study extends the spirit of the UNCRPD (2006) by suggesting that disability policy must move beyond a narrow emphasis on equality of opportunity toward a capabilities-informed commitment to equity – one that addresses underlying structural disadvantages rather than assuming their absence.

The demand for a society that offers equitable inclusion resonates with the ethical foundations of the Capability Approach, which is grounded in the principles of human dignity and social justice (Nussbaum, 2000; Riddle, 2022; Sen, 1999). These underpinning principles of human dignity and social justice have guided the Capability Approach in its critique of utility or resource-based frameworks (Robeyns, 2017). Rather than focusing on equal distribution of resources, Sen's (1992) famous question – *"Equality of what?"* – shifts the focus toward equality of capabilities. Thus, society should be mindful not of equal distribution of resources, but of the fact that different individuals may require different resources to achieve comparable freedoms and well-being (Sen, 1999, 2009). This reflects the core demand of PWDs in Pakistan: that society provides the conditions for equitable inclusion, enabling them to live a life marked by full participation – a vision that stands in stark contrast to the exclusion documented in recent studies (Ali, 2024; British Council, 2019; Dixon, 2023).

The capability for equitable inclusion also offers a valuable lens through which to understand the tension between available resources and the aspiration to lead a dignified human life. The findings indicate that PWDs face a deprivation of resources necessary for equitable inclusion in society, which in turn compromises their ability to live with dignity. The accounts of Bilal, Mariam, and Shahid in Section 6.4.2 indicate how general infrastructure fails to accommodate their diverse bodily needs, a limitation also highlighted in earlier findings (Ali, 2024; Bhatti et al., 2025; Hussain et al., 2022; Sabar et al., 2024). Similarly, the voices of Sana and Mariam in Section 7.2 critique the oversimplified and low-quality curriculum provided to students with disabilities. They emphasise that such educational provision places them at a disadvantage when pursuing higher education or entering the labour market. These findings align with Hammad and Singal (2015), who identified curriculum-related issues as a significant barrier to educational equity for blind women in Pakistan. They also reinforce Booth and Ainscow's (1998) argument that shortcomings in special education restrict future opportunities for inclusion in higher education and employment for PWDs. In addition, participants Fatima and Sidra in Section 7.3.1 point to the lack of teaching resources and the inaccessibility of educational institutions as key structural impediments to a desirable future. Earlier literature similarly points to the shortcomings of educational and infrastructural resources available to PWDs in Pakistan (Hafeez 2020; Upadhayay and Kakar 2024). These findings also underscore why these individuals aspire to achieve equitable inclusion as a pathway to a dignified and just life. Unlike other resource-based perspectives – prominently John Rawls, 1971 – CA suggests that individuals are heterogeneous in their abilities, and any assessment of well-being based on equality of resources would not do justice. The Capability Approach's central aim is to assess what freedoms people have 'to be and do' in their valued spheres of life. Therefore, Sen (1999) argues that the focus should be on how to create possibilities for equality of capabilities (outcomes) by assessing people's heterogeneous social and personal conditions and altering social arrangements (resources and conversion factors) accordingly to widen their capabilities and freedoms. This strengthens the demand of PWDs for equitable inclusion – not only for equity of opportunities, but also to escape the "*conversion handicap*" (Sen, 2009, p. 258).

The findings of this study suggest that capability deficits among PWDs cannot be attributed solely to differences in conversion factors, as Sen (1985, 1999) proposes. While negative conversion factors – such as discriminatory attitudes and exclusionary institutional practices – were evident across participants' accounts, the findings also highlight the role of resource deprivation in constraining capability formation. For instance, the lack of teaching resources, accessible facilities, and funding (Section 7.3.1), along with the absence of organisational resources (Sections 6.4.1, 6.4.2), illustrates the interplay between limited resources and adverse conversion factors. This combination compounds what Sen (2009, p. 258) terms the "*conversion handicap*," producing capability deficits (Mitra, 2017) and leaving aspirations for equitable inclusion unfulfilled. Thus, while conversion factors remain central to understanding variations in capability sets, this study also demonstrates that inadequacies in state-level resources are critical in explaining why aspirations often remain unrealised. Sen's (1992) question *"Equality of What?"* is particularly illuminating in resource-rich contexts, thereby enabling a meaningful comparison of capability sets. In resource-deficient contexts like Pakistan, however, the priority must also include addressing the adequacy of resources themselves, as severe deprivation constrains the very formation of capabilities. The findings of this study show that for many PWDs in Pakistan, resource scarcity – alongside adverse conversion factors – severely limits capability development, rendering the question of capability equality secondary to the urgent need for basic enabling resources. This is echoed in the study by Ton et al. (2020), which, in the context of Vietnam, emphasises the importance of institutional resources alongside conversion factors in enabling PWDs to cope with disasters. Importantly, the findings of current research suggest that achieving equitable inclusion depends on the generation and provision of resources at multiple levels – within workplaces by employers and within the broader public sphere by governments and other institutional actors. Without such provisions, the capability for equitable inclusion remains unrealised, eroding the very foundation upon which the pursuit of a dignified life depends.

The deficit in the capability for equitable inclusion constitutes a *corrosive disadvantage* (Wolff and De-Shalit, 2007, p. 55) – a disadvantage that not only undermines well-being in one domain of life but also triggers and reinforces disadvantages across other life domains. Consequently, the erosion of equitable inclusion constrains a range of interrelated capabilities, ultimately impairing the capability to live a dignified life. The findings across this study reveal that tokenistic inclusion – the absence of equitable inclusion – often intensifies experiences of disrespect and humiliation in multiple areas of life. For instance, in Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2, Abid and Usman describe how discriminatory treatment in the workplace undermined their dignity, directly constraining their ability to participate in a socially respectable manner and on equal terms. For Bilal (Section 6.4.2), the inaccessibility of infrastructure was not merely an inconvenience but a profound insult to his dignity, illustrating how infrastructural exclusion erodes self-worth and social recognition. Aisha’s account (story-3) reveals the embodied consequences of such exclusion: to avoid using inaccessible school toilets, she would skip breakfast and refrain from drinking water, and, in cases of urgent need, crawl to the toilet – an experience that stripped her of bodily autonomy and dignity. Similarly, Nabeel (Section 7.2) asks, “*Do you think disabled children are animals to be herded into separate schools?”*, underscoring the dehumanising impact of educational segregation, where denial of mainstream inclusion communicates inferiority and non-belonging. Collectively, these accounts demonstrate that the denial of equitable inclusion –

whether social, environmental, or institutional – not only limits specific capabilities such as work, education, bodily integrity, and social affiliation, but also cumulatively undermines the broader capability to lead a dignified human life. To my knowledge, no CA-based disability study has explicitly identified the deprivation of equitable inclusion in society as a corrosive disadvantage undermining the capability to lead a dignified human life. Mutanga's (2015) study did identify the capability of inclusion among eleven capabilities aspired to by students with disabilities in the South African higher education (HE) context. However, it neither conceptualises the 'capability for equitable inclusion' as a pathway to achieving a dignified life nor frames its deprivation as leading to the deprivation of the capability to lead a dignified life.

While grounded in a bottom-up, participatory approach aligned with Sen's framework (1999), this study's identification of the 'capability for equitable inclusion' nonetheless exhibits strong conceptual resonance with Nussbaum's (2000, 2011) proposed list of capabilities – particularly affiliation, control over one's environment, and bodily integrity. Robeyns (2003, 2017) points out that even when a capability list developed within Sen's framework ends up matching Nussbaum's in content, the two remain theoretically distinct because their underlying purposes and assumptions differ. This distinction supports the theoretical basis of the current study's bottom-up approach. While the identified capability for equitable inclusion may share similarities with elements of Nussbaum's framework, it is conceptually different as it emerges directly from the lived experiences and perspectives of PWDs. A further point of theoretical convergence with Nussbaum's central capabilities lies in her assertion that dignity constitutes the foundational condition for a flourishing human life. This alignment highlights the conceptual richness of equitable inclusion and its potential to serve as a unifying capability through which multiple aspects of human flourishing can be pursued. This resonates with Riddle's (2022) proposition that social inclusion is a central requirement of any just institutional arrangement.

Having examined the capability for equitable inclusion as a foundational condition for living a dignified life, the discussion now turns to another central aspiration – the capability for community contribution – which not only supports the pursuit of a dignified life but also functions as a mechanism for achieving equitable inclusion.

9.2.2 Capability for Community Contribution

Another central aspiration that emerged from the empirical findings is the capability for community contribution. In this study, this capability is understood not as an obligation placed upon persons with disabilities to 'give back' in order to justify their inclusion, but as a freely chosen expression of agency through which PWDs seek to shape, strengthen, and uplift their communities. It is enacted through diverse forms of engagement, including advocacy, rights-based action, peer support, and the creation of opportunities for others within the disability community. Such contributions, often forged in the face of systemic exclusion, represent not compliance with externally imposed expectations, but the reclaiming of social space and the assertion of collective identity and value within society. This definition deliberately distances itself from neoliberal framings of disability inclusion, which often link the value of PWDs to their economic productivity or capacity to reduce welfare dependency (Grover and Soldatic, 2013).

The capability for community contribution emerges in this study as a powerful pathway to a dignified life. Defined here as a freely chosen expression of agency, it enables PWDs to assert their value on their own terms, reclaim social recognition, and challenge dominant narratives of dependence and pity. While this capability supports the pursuit of a dignified life by fostering respect within communities and institutions, it also acts as a mechanism for achieving equitable inclusion through rights-based acts of community engagement, advocacy, and collective empowerment.

The findings suggest that the capability for community contribution emerges as a vital pathway to realising a dignified life – not only for oneself, but also as a means of enabling others to live with dignity. For example, Nabeel (in Section 8.2 and story-1) reflected: *“Now, the contribution I make to society satisfies me and makes me feel good about my existence. I am the same person, but now people don’t see my disability – they see my contributions.”* Similarly, Omar (Story-4) described how, through collective welfare initiatives, *“We started seeing respect in people’s eyes.”* These examples illustrate that, through their contributions, PWDs assert their relevance, claim social recognition, and foster mutual respect – all core elements of a dignified life. They align with Nussbaum’s (2000, 2011) central capability of affiliation, which highlights mutual recognition, respect, and the ability to engage in community life on equal terms. In Nabeel’s case, contributing to the community shifted how others perceived him – from being defined by his disability to being valued for his social impact. For Omar and his group, their welfare work led to tangible respect from the community, echoing findings in disability rights literature that participation in collective action can challenge stigma and reshape public attitudes (Charlton, 1998; Goodley, 2017;

Shakespeare, 2014). Importantly, this capability was also exercised to foster dignity in others: Zara (Section 8.3) described connecting rural disabled women with entrepreneurial opportunities, while Usman (Section 8.3) taught visually impaired individuals online earning methods to support independent livelihoods with dignity. These examples reflect Sen's (1999, 2009) emphasis on the intrinsic and instrumental value of capabilities: intrinsically valued for the dignity and self-respect they earn and instrumentally valued for their role in expanding the capabilities of others. The instrumental nature of the capability for community contribution is further evident in its role in fostering equitable inclusion. Participants described how institutional neglect of their rights spurred them to speak out, not only for themselves but for the wider disability community. Ali and Nadeem (Section 8.2) stressed the importance of collective advocacy to demand rights and drive systemic change. Through such acts of advocacy, they are not merely seeking personal inclusion but are actively engaged in creating more equitable and inclusive social environments for others as well. Collectively, these accounts highlight that community contribution in this study is a self-defined, rights-based expression of agency, holding both intrinsic value (personal dignity) and instrumental value (enabling the dignity of others and expanding equitable inclusion). This finding extends the Capability Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) by showing that contributions within marginalised communities can serve as a pathway to both equitable inclusion and a dignified life, aligning with Milner and Kelly's (2009) argument that lasting social change for marginalised groups is most often driven by their own actions from the socio-political margins.

The collective efforts of PWDs described in Section 8.4 demonstrate the powerful role of the capability for community contribution in fostering equitable inclusion.

These efforts range from guiding parents and encouraging investment in the education of children with disabilities to organising community gatherings, providing peer counselling, sensitising workplaces, collaborating with institutions to promote disability-inclusive practices, and running public awareness campaigns to challenge harmful myths and shift societal attitudes. Taken together, these actions operate as a collective force for reshaping social attitudes, practices, and structures, thereby transforming the institutional landscape, as noted by Choudhury et al. (2021). In this way, the capability for community contribution emerges as a powerful pathway to achieving dignity and equitable inclusion, enabling persons with disabilities not only to claim their own dignity but also to advance a more just and inclusive society for others. The UNCRPD's provisions, particularly Articles 4(3), 19, and 29, align with the capability for community participation by affirming the right of persons with disabilities to actively engage in, contribute to, and shape their communities through inclusion, empowerment, and representation via OPDs.

This capability can be understood as a 'fertile functioning' (Wolff and De-Shalit, 2007) – a multiplier of advantage in the pursuit of a dignified life and the fostering of equitable inclusion. The identification of such a fertile functioning is particularly significant in resource-deprived contexts, where formal support systems are limited or absent. As Nussbaum (2011) notes, identifying fertile functionings is one of the most effective intervention points for public policy. A key conceptual contribution of this research is the recognition of the capability for community contribution as a fertile functioning for persons with disabilities – an insight that has been overlooked in existing disability-focused Capability Approach scholarship. While Austin (2018) identified 'affiliation' as a fertile functioning for people living with dementia, this study extends existing discussions by identifying community contribution as a distinct fertile functioning for PWDs – one that operates as an agentic pathway to equitable inclusion and a dignified life.

The capability for community contribution underlines that PWDs want to be ‘in charge’ of the change they envision in their lives, positioning them directly as agents of change. This strongly supports Sen’s (1999) claim that what people value shapes their development trajectory. While this capability bears conceptual resonance with Nussbaum’s (2011) capability of affiliation, which emphasises empathy, social relationships, and community life, it is significantly more dynamic and explicitly agentic in nature. Nussbaum (2011) advocates a constitutional guarantee for a threshold level of each listed capability as a governmental obligation (p. 70). Yet, as Robeyns (2017) notes, her account remains largely silent on the question of who bears responsibility for the actualisation of these capabilities in practice. In this respect, Nussbaum’s framework affords limited space for recognising individuals, particularly those in marginalised positions, as active contributors to their own development and to broader societal transformation. The capability for community contribution, as articulated in this study, directly addresses this gap. It conceptualises persons with disabilities not only as rights-holders of institutional entitlements but also as active agents whose collective and individual actions expand equitable inclusion and enable dignity – both for themselves and for others. Thus, the capability for community contribution offers a more contextually responsive and participatory framing than Nussbaum’s list (2011), positioning individuals as co-creators of the very conditions in which capabilities can flourish.

The empirical exploration of capabilities within the general CA literature is limited, and to my knowledge, none of the CA-inspired disability literature has proposed the *capability for community contribution*. Empirical capabilities identified by Mutanga (2015), Trani et al. (2011), and Ton et al. (2020) fall primarily within the personal domain, and none reflect a desire for social transformation through community contribution. Rooted in the unique contextual fabric of Pakistani society, this capability underscores a shift from marginalisation to centrality where persons with disabilities envision themselves as co-constructors of their communities.

9.2.3 Pursuing a Dignified Life: The Interplay of Capability for Equitable Inclusion and the Capability for Community Contribution

The findings indicate that the capability to lead a 'dignified human life' is an overarching meta-capability that is fulfilled through the capabilities of equitable inclusion and community contribution. Thus, the opportunity to lead a life of dignity, in this research context, can be achieved through two interrelated pathways:

1. **A structural pathway through capability for equitable inclusion** – reflecting PWDs' demand for equitable opportunities, not merely equal ones. The capability for equitable inclusion appears as state/institutional responsibility to create equitable opportunities across different life domains, enabling all citizens to live a life of dignity and equal inherent worth.
2. **An agentic pathway through capability for community contribution** – showing PWDs' desire to be active contributors to social change, rather than passive recipients of change. Dignity, in this sense, is not merely

granted but also claimed through agency, collective action, and resistance to marginalisation.

The relationship between the capability for equitable inclusion and the capability for community contribution is cyclical and mutually reinforcing, rather than linear. The capability for equitable inclusion provides the essential structural conditions – fairness, recognition, accessibility, and non-discrimination – that enable persons with disabilities to participate meaningfully in society and thereby live with dignity. Without equitable institutional arrangements, dignity remains constrained by structural barriers.

At the same time, the capability for community contribution plays a dual role. It strengthens the very conditions required for equitable inclusion by enabling persons with disabilities to influence their environments through advocacy, collective action, and community engagement. In doing so, it helps reshape social norms, challenge discriminatory attitudes, and push for institutional reform. This capability also independently enhances their dignity by affirming agency, purpose, and social value.

Taken together, these capabilities form an interdependent structure in which agency and structure co-produce the conditions for a dignified life. This reinforces the core argument of the study: achieving dignity for persons with disabilities in Pakistan requires not only institutional transformation but also the recognition and support of their individual and collective agency. This relationship of capabilities aligns with Robeyns' (2017) observation that some capabilities are interdependent, with the achievement of one enabling the realisation of others.

The interdependent relationship between these capabilities is illustrated in the figure below.

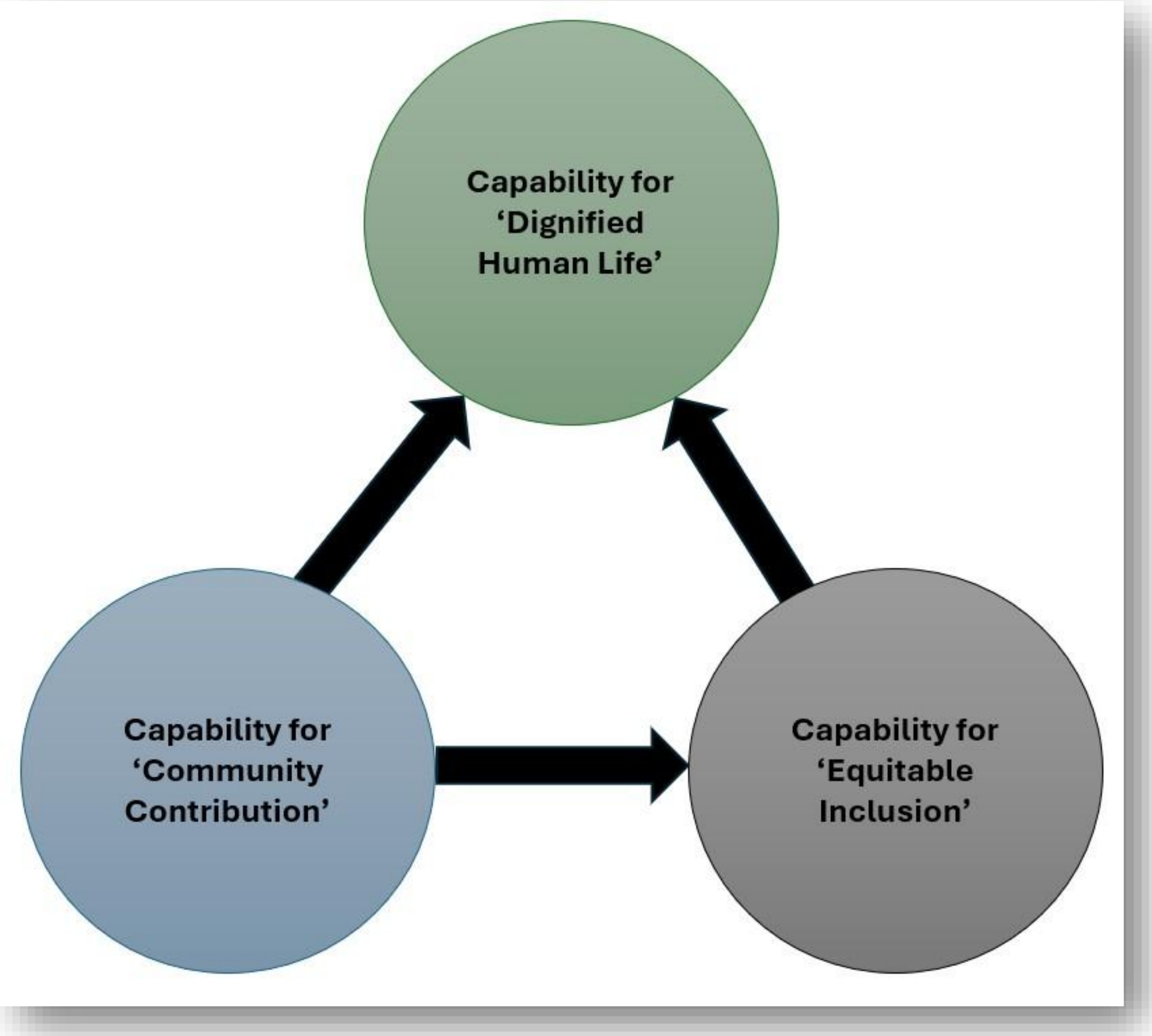

Figure 9.1. Interdependency model of capabilities

This study's primary conceptual contribution lies in the development of an interdependent model of capabilities which provides a fuller understanding of what it means to live a dignified and flourishing life under conditions of structural constraint. It demonstrates that the pursuit of justice for persons with disabilities requires both institutional transformation and the recognition and support of their agency, reinforcing that structural reforms and agentic efforts are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

While Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011) argues that a life of dignity is possible primarily through institutional or constitutional support, this study extends her agenda and the capability approach by arguing that, within the context of Pakistan, it is a multi-layered process. It requires not only institutional support but also the active agency of PWDs and the engagement of multiple actors at various social levels to collectively foster the conditions necessary for a dignified life.

9.2.4 Significance of the Identified Capabilities for the Capability Literature

While the capability for equitable inclusion is positioned in this study as a foundational pathway to a dignified life, the empirical data reveal that PWDs in Pakistan experience a deprivation of this capability. As a result, equitable inclusion currently exists more as an aspiration than as a capability. Sen (2009, p. 236) refers only to those capabilities that people can achieve or choose from. This suggests that PWDs' desire for 'equitable inclusion' is not yet part of their capability set and therefore remains an aspiration. This also helps clarify the distinction between aspirations and capabilities within the traditional CA literature. This also returns to the earlier question posed in the theoretical framework: If an aspiration is not yet part of a person's capability set, is it still meaningful to include it in capability discussions? The empirical findings of this study suggest that the answer is yes. Even when aspirations are not yet realised due to structural, institutional, or environmental constraints, they hold intrinsic value as expressions of what individuals have reason to value. Such aspirations reveal the direction of agency, expose the gaps between current functionings and valued beings/doings, and help identify the structural changes required for their eventual conversion into capabilities. In this sense, unrealised aspirations are not merely “wish lists” but essential indicators of both deprivation and potential, warranting full consideration within capability discussions. Building on this perspective, more recent scholarship within the capability literature has begun to envision aspirations as alternative ways of living that people can imagine (Baillergeau and Duyvendak, 2022; Conradie and Robeyns, 2013; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022) and has linked them to people’s well-being (Ballet et al., 2018; Ibrahim, 2011, p. 5). This research advances that agenda by recognising the aspiration of persons with disabilities for equitable inclusion as essential to their well-being and to the pursuit of a dignified life.

Moreover, the aspiration for equitable inclusion has been a powerful driver of agency among PWDs, evident in their self-help initiatives directed toward creating social change. Evolving capability literature (Bazzani, 2023; Hobson and Zimmermann, 2022) highlights the role of aspirations in unlocking agency, yet empirical studies remain scarce – with notable exceptions such as Conradie and Robeyns (2013) in South Africa and Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) in Norway. The findings of this research extend this line of inquiry to the context of Pakistan. This study advances the capability–disability discourse by empirically identifying, through a bottom-up process, the capabilities valued by persons with disabilities within the specific socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Capability identification grounded in the lived experiences of PWDs through participatory, bottom-up approaches remains scarce in the literature, with only a few notable examples – such as Mutanga (2015) in South Africa, Parey (2020) in Trinidad, Ton et al. (2020) in Vietnam, and Trani et al. (2011) in Afghanistan.

9.2.5 Policy Significance of Identified Capabilities

The identification of these capabilities carries substantial policy relevance and adds important nuance to the ongoing theoretical debate between Sen (1999, 2004) and Nussbaum (2000, 2011). Guided by Sen's (1999) emphasis on context-sensitivity and public reasoning, this study adopts a bottom-up approach that centres the voices of PWDs in Pakistan. Such an approach avoids the imposition of pre-defined capability lists, as advocated by Nussbaum (2000, 2011), which risk overlooking locally valued priorities (Grech, 2015). The identification of capabilities in this study aligns with Sen's (1999, 2004) view that capabilities should emerge from participatory deliberation that is responsive to specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This approach intentionally maintains distance from Nussbaum's universal list (2000, 2011), which has been critiqued for imposing paternalistic values (Deneulin, 2002; Khader, 2018; Robeyns, 2003; Sen, 2004). Accordingly, the findings lean towards Sen's position in the identification phase, demonstrating the value of grassroots, lived-experience-driven capability mapping in revealing what PWDs themselves deem essential for their dignity and inclusion. At the same time, the study also recognises the merit in Nussbaum's (2000, 2011) argument that identified capabilities should be formalised within constitutional or legislative frameworks as highlighted by Capability for equitable inclusion. Such formalisation could signal an explicit institutional commitment to a 'bare minimum' of decency, provide policymakers with concrete guidance, and establish an enforceable basis for accountability – an element consistent with Scott's (2013) regulative pillar of institutions, which derives legitimacy from formal rules and legal frameworks. This argument is further supported by those who defend the value of a prescribed list for policy purposes (Claassen, 2016; Vizard and Burchardt, 2007). This study therefore deepens Nussbaum's agenda by showing that capabilities are shaped through a dual dynamic: institutional guarantees that create enabling conditions, and the agentic pathways through which persons with disabilities convert these conditions into actual functionings. In this way, the analysis extends Nussbaum's (2000, 2011) institutional emphasis by foregrounding the interaction between structural arrangements and lived agency as a central mechanism through which capabilities are achieved.

9.2.6 Concluding Remarks on Research Question 1

The capabilities discussed above reveal the complex social realities that persons with disabilities in Pakistan navigate. Their persistent aspirations for dignity, equitable inclusion, and community contribution reflect not only their human development goals but also a form of resistance to systemic injustice and institutional neglect. This section has shown that while these capabilities remain partially unrealised, they are deeply meaningful and reflect a strong agency among PWDs.

This sets the stage for the following section, which explores how a range of personal, societal and institutional factors either facilitate or constrain the achievement of these capabilities.

9.3 The Interplay of Personal, Contextual and Institutional Factors

This section addresses the second research question of the study: *what personal-contextual-institutional factors hinder or enable the achievement of aspirations among persons with disabilities?* The findings presented across Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight not only illuminate the aspirations of these people but also simultaneously echo the diverse personal, contextual, and institutional factors that influence these aspirations. The findings reveal a complex interplay between a range of factors – such as impairment, gender, religion, family, disability culture, disability legislation, educational pathways, organisational practices, and general architectural infrastructure – as influential for the realisation of PWDs' aspirations within the Pakistani context. While the study highlights how some of these factors play the role of structural factors that constrain aspirations from turning into capabilities, it also draws attention to key enabling factors – particularly the moral support derived from religion, and the support from the family – that have been instrumental in sustaining the resilience among persons with disabilities amid ongoing challenges.

The Capability Approach – while distinguishing between means or capability inputs (goods, income, services, and commodities a person has access to) (Robeyns, 2005, 2017) and ends (capabilities or agency achievements) – emphasises the processes that mediate the conversion of means into valued capabilities (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009; Sen, 1999). It is significant to mention that agency achievements can manifest as realised functionings when individuals successfully attain the goals they value. However, the concept is broader than functionings or capabilities alone, since agency also encompasses the pursuit of goals beyond one’s own well-being, including social or collective objectives. Because agency achievements are shaped by contextual conditions, it becomes essential to examine how conversion factors function as social structures, as proposed by Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018), enabling or restricting the exercise of agency. Building on this proposition, Bazzani (2023) extends the Capability

Approach by developing a dynamic account of how social context, understood in terms of conversion factors, shapes agency. He argues that these structurally embedded conditions can both restrict and enable the capacity for agency. From this perspective, conversion factors are not merely mediators of resource transformation, as traditionally envisioned within the CA literature (Sen, 1992; Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2005, 2017), but can be understood as structurally embedded conditions that either constrain agency, in line with the traditional role of social structures (Form and Wilterdink, 2025), or enhance agency capacity when conditions are supportive (Bazzani, 2023). This theoretical development offers a move beyond CA's long-standing critique of 'structural individualism' (Deneulin, 2008; Gangas, 2020) and provides a valuable entry point for this study's analysis of conversion factors through an institutional lens. As outlined in Chapter 3, while the Capability Approach provides a helpful taxonomy of conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005, 2017), it has been criticised for insufficiently addressing the root causes of deprivation embedded in historical and institutional structures (Deneulin, 2008; Sayer, 2012). To address this limitation, the study draws on Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework to unpack how deep-rooted social structures shape these conversion factors. The following section elaborates on this integration through the study's findings.

9.3.1 Structural Conversion Factors

This section – while answering the first part of the second research question, *what factors hinder the achievement of aspirations among PWDs?* – will articulate the interplay between impairment and various other conversion factors in creating disadvantages in the lives of PWDs seeking to achieve their valued aspirations. ‘Impairment’ within traditional CA literature is treated as a negative personal conversion factor that inhibits a person’s ability to convert resources into capabilities (Mitra, 2006; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999, 2009). Sen (2009, p. 258) emphasises that PWDs are “*disadvantaged in converting income and resources into good living*” and experience ‘conversion handicap’ due to their impairment. However, the findings of this study show that impairment alone does not account for the disadvantage experienced by PWDs; rather, it intersects with socio-cultural norms, educational pathways, organisational practices, legislation, infrastructure, and gender within the Pakistani context, producing negative outcomes. The findings of this study contrast with the medical model of disability, which attributes a disabled person’s life experiences primarily to ‘impairment’ as a distinct and sole conversion factor – a view noted by Mutanga (2015) in her analysis and earlier discussed by Shakespeare and Watson (1997) in the context of the medical model of disability. These findings also contrast with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), which attributes disadvantage primarily to social barriers (Barnes, 1991; Oliver, 1996) while overlooking the role of impairment itself. The findings of this study point instead to a more nuanced interplay, in which both impairment and structural-institutional factors interact to constrain the conversion of resources into valued capabilities.

An institutional perspective – through the three-pillar framework (Scott, 2013) – of conversion factors adds nuance to understanding how these factors play a structural role. Findings indicate that despite the existence of a disability legislative framework (a social conversion factor in CA) – such as employment (Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance of 1981), inclusive education

(National Education Policy, 2017), and accessibility provision (Accessibility Code, 2006) – loopholes exist in its implementation (Gul, 2020) as indicated by the accounts of Bilal (Section 6.2.1), Stakeholder 10 (Section 6.4.1), and Stakeholder 7 (Section 7.3.1). This reflects weaknesses in the regulative pillar, where legislation is often weakly enforced or symbolic (Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016), in the Pakistani context.

The domain of education provides a clear illustration of how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars interact to shape conversion handicap. Findings from Chapter Seven (Sections 7.2 and 7.3) highlight the state of special education and reveal that mainstream education is not yet ready to accommodate PWDs. Education of PWDs – as a resource and a conversion factor in the Capability Approach (Robeyns, 2005; Taylor, 2012) – continues to operate in segregated silos, with limited transition pathways for PWDs into the mainstream system. Inclusive education can catalyse change in the cultural-cognitive pillar by reshaping beliefs, values, and shared understandings, while also transforming local norms and relational dynamics that significantly shape the experiences of students with disabilities (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Järkestig Berggren et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2020). This is also supported by the accounts of Rabia, Nadeem, and Mehwish (Section 7.3). Weak regulation and institutional inertia in education thus constrain the capability for equitable inclusion and limit pathways to employment.

Employment findings reinforce this pattern. Chapter Six shows that, despite legislative provisions (Gul, 2020), organisations often circumvent requirements or comply superficially, neglecting genuine inclusion and dignity (Ali, 2024; Shaw, 2022). Organisations continue to undervalue the work of PWDs by relying on assumptions about their abilities (Acker, 2006), their productivity (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020), and by upholding able-bodied norms (Williams and Mavin, 2012), as suggested by Kiran and Bilal (Section 6.2.1). These assumptions often result in lower-level positions and reduced salaries for PWDs, as indicated by Amir and Zara (Section 6.3.1) and Ali (Section 6.3.2). From a capability perspective, this situation illustrates a significant *conversion handicap* (Sen, 2009), where formal access to work does not translate into decent employment due to structural and attitudinal barriers. These findings align with the ILO's (2012) categorisation of *non-standard employment*, which tend to offer lower job security, fewer benefits, and limited career progression to already marginalised social groups. Although such hiring may appear inclusive on the surface, it constitutes a hollow form of diversity that lacks true equality of opportunity (Kirton and Greene, 2021). These accounts affirm Sen’s claim that PWDs suffer from two forms of material disadvantage: they earn less than able-bodied people and require more money to achieve similar functionings (Robeyns, 2006). Further evidence is provided by Usman (Section 6.2.2), who highlights that some hiring practices instrumentalise disability to elicit sympathy from customers. This reflects the poor enforcement of disability employment laws, the influence of organisational values and norms (Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015), and deep-seated beliefs about disability (Choudhury et al., 2021). Woods et al. (2022) rightly point out how broader societal realities are expressed and reproduced within work organisations. Together, these legal, normative, and cultural factors manifest in organisational practices that, shaped by institutional logics (Kulkarni et al., 2017), undermine the realisation of aspirations for dignified and meaningful work.

Accessibility legislation is similarly under-enforced. As Sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 show, provisions for accessible infrastructure are seldom realised in public or private spaces. Neglect of public facilities and systemic social deprivation are among the major sources of unfreedom (Sen, 1999). While legislation formally supports inclusion, limited enforcement and weak institutional accountability create significant gaps between policy and practice (Ineland, 2020). This again demonstrates the failure of formal institutions to convert legal provisions into tangible results. Architectural infrastructure across public and private spaces is predominantly designed with the able-bodied population in mind, rendering it inherently exclusionary. This augments Campbell's (2009) understanding of 'ableism', reinforcing how marginalised identities share an 'other space' with dominant identities (Goodley, 2017, p. 88). Ableist infrastructure (Campbell, 2009) is a physical manifestation of deeper beliefs about who is entitled to full participation in society. Consequently, inaccessible infrastructure – an environmental conversion factor in CA (Robeyns, 2017) – not only restricts the independent movement of these individuals but also reinforces their institutional positioning as dependent and needing care (in Sections 6.4.1 and 6.4.2). Such social positioning prioritises norms about their care and dependency rather than facilitating their independence (Choudhury et al., 2021). This promotes social values favouring charitable or paternalistic responses towards PWDs. Thus, society comes to internalise the idea that PWDs are inherently dependent, reinforcing stereotypes and shaping how disability is understood at a subconscious level (Kulkarni et al., 2017). This inaccessibility further impedes the inclusion of PWDs in mainstream education and employment sectors. Mainstream educational institutions are neither physically accessible nor pedagogically equipped to accommodate diverse learning needs (as suggested in Sections 7.2 and 7.3). The structural design of inaccessible buildings and the absence of assistive technologies (as highlighted in Section 7.3.1) sends an implicit message about who belongs in these spaces. Education has further long-term implications for the employment prospects of PWDs (Moore, 2015).

Despite Pakistan being a signatory to the UNCRPD (2006), these normative obligations have not translated into meaningful outcomes. This directly addresses the earlier question of whether “soft” mechanisms – such as the UNCRPD’s monitoring processes, benchmarking practices, and voluntary standards – can meaningfully drive disability inclusion in contexts of weak regulative enforcement. The findings suggest that, in Pakistan, such mechanisms have limited traction. Although legislation exists, implementation remains inconsistent: employment quotas are routinely circumvented, accessibility codes are observed only symbolically, and education continues in segregated silos. In this environment, normative frameworks like the UNCRPD help to establish expectations of inclusion but lack the force to ensure compliance. As Ineland (2020) cautions, soft mechanisms risk becoming largely symbolic in weak institutional settings. Thus, the persistent marginalisation of persons with disabilities cannot be reduced to a failure of regulation alone; it also reflects deeply embedded cultural understandings that continue to deny PWDs recognition as rightful participants in society.

The societal understanding of disability (Sections 6.2.1, 6.3.2, and 7.3) highlights prevailing social attitudes toward persons with disabilities. These attitudes are rooted in pity, sympathy, and dependency-based understandings of disability, which promote a charitable rather than a rights-based approach (Ali, 2024). Such perspectives reflect the normative pillar in shaping societal expectations, while also illustrating how the cultural-cognitive pillar reinforces a fixed identity (Kulkarni et al., 2017). Consistent with Choudhury et al. (2021), these findings point to the role of informal institutions – such as social codes, traditions, and established structures – in collectively shaping the culture surrounding disability. This charitable mindset results in the ‘unfavourable inclusion’ (Sen, 2000) of PWDs in all walks of life in Pakistan. This explains how the understanding of disability has been institutionalised in the context of Pakistan, portraying these people as dependent and in need of care rather than as autonomous, rights-bearing individuals. Similar patterns are reported by Dixon (2023) and the British Council (2014, 2019).

Gender – as a personal conversion factor (Robeyns, 2017) – emerges as a significant axis of institutional oppression within this study. In highly patriarchal contexts like Pakistan (Habiba et al., 2016), the social construction of gender compounds the marginalisation of women with disabilities. From an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; Wickenden, 2023), disability and gender are not simply additive disadvantages but interact to create distinct patterns of exclusion. The experiences of women in this study show that capabilities are shaped not only by disability-related barriers but also by patriarchal gender norms that restrict their aspirations (Hammad and Singal, 2015). For example, mobility restrictions are reinforced not only by inaccessible infrastructure but also by social expectations that position women as dependents and guardians of family honour (as suggested by Mariam in Section 6.4.2). Sen (1992) also contends that differences in identity matter and play a central role in understanding inequality. In this way, disability and gender intersect to generate unique ‘unfreedoms’ (Sen, 1999; Verkerk et al., 2001), producing unequal capabilities. This aligns with Nussbaum's observation that "*unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities*" (2000, p. 1).

Through an analytical approach sensitive to institutional effects, this study highlights the recursive interactions among conversion factors associated with the regulative, normative, and socio-cultural dimensions (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014). The analysis suggests that, in the Pakistani disability context, conversion factors rarely operate in isolation; rather, their positive or negative influence depends on their interactions with one another. These findings align with evolving Capability Approach literature, which recognises that the framing of conversion factors as enabling or constraining depends on the context in which they operate (Hobson, 2018; Javornik and Yerkes, 2020). The findings also empirically support the theoretical proposition within CA scholarship that the joint interaction of diverse conversion factors plays a significant role in shaping this framing (Byskov et al., 2024; Sebastianelli, 2016).

Most existing capability-based disability literature, such as Dubois and Trani (2009), Trani et al. (2011), and Ton et al. (2021), has identified conversion factors empirically, but with a primary focus on categorising and illustrating them rather than examining their intersections in depth. Mutanga's (2015) study offers an important exception, exploring how impairments intersect with gender, race, class, and institutional policies to collectively impede disabled students' inclusion in higher education in South Africa. Building on this insight, the present study identifies a broader range of factors intersecting with impairment. It examines their cumulative impact on the capabilities of PWDs across employment, education, and society more broadly.

The flexible taxonomy of conversion factors in the Capability Approach (Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018) enables a context-sensitive understanding of how individual circumstances, social arrangements, and physical environments collectively influence the realisation of capabilities or agency achievement (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). This is reinforced by an institutional perspective (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014), which identifies a recursive institutional loop in Pakistani society – where a weak regulative structure shapes the normative pillar, influencing the cultural-cognitive pillar, and vice versa – ultimately producing the conversion hardships (Sen, 1999) faced by PWDs (Choudhury et al., 2021; Kulkarni et al., 2017).

The findings indicate that disadvantage is not the product of a single factor, but the outcome of an entire institutional ecosystem that continually reinforces marginalisation. This underscores that disparities in capabilities between able-bodied people and PWDs cannot be explained solely by personal differences but must be understood in relation to the broader institutional structure of society (Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014). This conclusion aligns with Sen's (1999, p. 142) assertion that "*opportunities to function are dependent on what institutions exist which can be evaluated on their contributions to our freedom*."

While the preceding analysis has examined how personal, social, and institutional factors constrain the aspirations of PWDs, the findings also reveal a vital counterpoint: the presence of enabling conversion factors.

9.3.2 Enabling Conversion Factors

Bazzani (2023) proposes that enabling conversion factors holds the potential to enhance agency capacity, which increases the possibilities for the realisation of capabilities. Building on this proposition, the discussion in this section will now unfold the role of enabling conversion factors. In this study, two such factors stand out: family support and religion, both of which played a profound role in sustaining aspirations despite structural barriers. In addition, the activism of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) emerged as a collective enabler; however, its significance will be examined in detail when addressing the third research question of this study.

9.3.2.1 Family Support

The findings of this study highlight the central role of families in enabling the aspirations of PWDs in Pakistan. Beyond material and financial assistance, families foster optimism, hope, and resilience, making aspirations achievable in contexts where institutional support is weak. Participants with disabilities repeatedly emphasised that without their families, many core functionings – such as attending school or travelling to work – would have been impossible. For example, Aisha (Section 5.3.3) recalled how her mother and sisters carried her to school in the absence of wheelchairs; Nabeel (Section 5.3.1) described the supportive role of his grandparents in ensuring his education, further asserting that in contexts like ours, *“we only have our families”*; and Abid (Section 5.3.2) declared, *“I could have done nothing without my family support.”* These narratives illustrate that family support is not only about filling institutional gaps but also about cultivating the emotional and psychological resources necessary to sustain aspirations.

Family support emerges here as an institutionally embedded (Choudhury et al., 2021) social conversion factor (Robeyns, 2017). The weak enforcement of disability laws and lack of accessible services oblige families to compensate for systemic neglect (British Council, 2019). The collectivist social fabric of Pakistan (Abbas and Wu, 2021) strongly endorses the family's caregiving role as a moral obligation (Choudhury et al., 2021). Both family members and PWDs internalise the belief that institutional support is either unavailable or inferior to familial care. This is evident from Abid's (Section 5.3.2) reflection that *"the kind of opportunities a family provides defines what a PWD could be in the future here (in Pakistan)."* The absence of institutional support, combined with social obligation and internalised beliefs, collectively reinforces the family's role as enabler of capability achievement.

The significance of family support is well established in disability studies. Family members are often the main, and typically unpaid, source of support for persons with disabilities (Burke et al., 2016). In employment contexts, family support has also been shown to shape job attitudes and sustain aspirations, alongside organisational support (Pérez et al., 2015). These insights are echoed in CA-based empirical disability research from other low-resource settings, which similarly highlights families as compensating agents for weak institutions. For example, Trani et al. (2011) describe Afghan families physically carrying disabled members in the absence of mobility aids, while Ton et al. (2019) demonstrate the crucial role of family in disaster evacuation for PWDs. Findings from this study resonate with such evidence, while emphasising the particular weight families carry in Pakistan's weak institutional environment.

This positioning also speaks to ongoing debates within the Capability Approach, where the role of family remains conceptually ambiguous. While some scholars treat family as part of a capability – such as Nussbaum's capability of affiliation –

others frame it as a resource or a source of social capabilities (Foster and Handy, 2008; Sen, 1999). This study supports the view that family should not be conceptualised as a capability in itself, as this risks blurring the distinction between means and ends (Binder and Coad, 2011). Instead, the findings illustrate how family operates simultaneously as a resource (providing tangible assistance) and a conversion factor (mediating structural disadvantages). For example, Mariam (Section 6.4.2) described how her family bridged gaps created by inaccessible infrastructure and patriarchal restrictions, thereby sustaining her employment aspirations. In this way, the study does not resolve the “circularity problem” (Binder and Coad, 2011) but demonstrates how it manifests in practice, offering a contextualised account of the family’s dual role. In this way, the findings also support Zimmermann’s (2006: 480) and Hobson’s (2013) argument that capability inputs and conversion factors are not intrinsically distinct from each other.

Yet, the findings also highlight the ambivalent role of family in supporting aspirations. For instance, in the education domain, it was highlighted that some families perceived children with disabilities as inherently dependent and therefore not in need of schooling. This view was noted by Stakeholder 13 (Section 7.2) and is reflected in Nabeel’s story (Section 5.3.1), where his parents, influenced by societal pressures, initially believed he did not require formal education until his grandparents intervened. A similar pattern emerges in Omar’s account (Section 5.3.4), which shows how collective efforts were needed to persuade parents in his community that their disabled children deserved access to education and opportunities for learning. Similarly, Stakeholder 2’s account (Section 7.2) illustrates how some families adopt religious education as a strategy to enhance the social standing of their disabled children and to counteract stigma. While this approach may provide a sense of acceptance within the community, it can also create unintended disadvantages. By limiting children to purely religious education, families may inadvertently restrict their access to broader learning opportunities and skills development, thereby reducing their prospects for future employment and economic independence. Such beliefs and strategies position the family as a constraining conversion factor, where deep-seated beliefs about disability reinforce exclusion rather than opportunity (Choudhury et al., 2021). This duality suggests that family influence cannot be understood as uniformly enabling; instead, it is mediated by broader social norms, stigma, and resource constraints.

In sum, this study positions family as a predominantly enabling – but contextually ambivalent – conversion factor. In Pakistan's weak institutional environment, families act as compensating agents that support capability achievement, often at significant personal and financial cost (British Council, 2019). At the same time, family influence can reproduce social stigma and low expectations, thereby constraining aspirations. This duality underscores the relational and context-dependent nature of conversion factors (Hobson, 2018; Javornik and Yerkes, 2020): family can act as both a bridge to opportunity and a barrier, depending on its interaction with wider social and institutional dynamics. Rather than assuming families can fill systemic gaps, disability policy must strengthen formal mechanisms to reduce the structural burdens that families currently shoulder.

The following section discusses religion as another enabling conversion factor identified in this study.

9.3.2.2 Religion

The Capability Approach literature suggests that personal conversion factors are the natural endowments of a person – those which affect their body and psychological makeup (Robeyns, 2005, 2017). The findings of this study show that religion positively shapes the psychological makeup of PWDs, significantly influencing their self-determination, optimism, aspirations, and motivation. While religion is not a natural endowment, in highly religious contexts it functions similarly to a personal conversion factor, insofar as internalised beliefs and faith shape individuals' psychological dispositions, resilience, and capacity to act.

Prominent aspects of individual agency, such as optimism, aspirations, and self-determination (Bazzani, 2023), are shown here to be strongly mediated by religious belief and the power of faith. Thus, the findings contend that religion operates as a personal conversion factor with a profound influence on individual agency. For instance, Abid (Section 5.3.2) found solace in faith, which helped him navigate life's challenges. Similarly, Nabeel (Sections 5.3.1 and 8.4) drew strength from the belief that God helps those who help themselves. This reflects a faith-driven sense of resilience and self-determination, which positively shapes individual agency. Such internalised beliefs frame divine support as conditional on self-initiative, thereby sustaining hope and motivating respondents to strive toward aspirations despite structural barriers. These findings also echo religious values that moralise self-reliance, presenting agency as not only desirable but also spiritually endorsed. For instance, Junaid (Section 8.2) highlighted that his disability provided him with the opportunity to serve humanity, considering himself "the chosen one" for this cause. He interprets hardship through a culturally internalised religious lens (Choudhury et al., 2021), viewing it as a manifestation of God’s will. This perspective reinforces his conviction that God selects individuals for special roles, transforming adversity into a source of meaning and purpose. This belief reframes his disability as a divine selection rather than a deficit. The respondent sees his disability as a moral platform through which he can fulfil his obligation to support fellow disabled people. This understanding of disability also has implications for the respondent’s agency. It suggests that religion supports the transformation of adversity into empowerment. This perspective underscores how religion helps to shift the narrative around disability; a positive reframing as a ‘contributor to humanity’ fosters this person’s confidence and resilience. Religion – in this study – plays a crucial role in augmenting agency for disabled people, significantly influencing their capabilities and well-being. In sum, Sen’s (1999) agency goals – self-well-being and other-regarding goals – are augmented by the empowering role of religious belief, as demonstrated in the examples above.

These findings align with Akbar and Woods (2020), who, in their study of Pakistani parents raising children with disabilities in England, found that religious beliefs functioned as a key coping mechanism. Their participants interpreted disability as the Will of God, a blessing, or a divine test, drawing strength from prayer and gratitude. Similarly, respondents in this study viewed religion as a source of resilience and acceptance. However, the findings of the current study extend this perspective by showing that religion also actively enhances agency: participants not only accepted disability as God’s will but also mobilised their faith to pursue aspirations and collective action.

While the preceding discussion demonstrates how internalised religious beliefs shape individual resilience and agency, the findings also indicate that religion simultaneously functions as a social conversion factor, shaping the wider societal and institutional environment within which PWDs pursue their valued beings and doings. In Pakistan’s highly religious context (predominantly ‘Islamic’), religious norms circulate collectively through families, communities, mosques, and charitable networks. These socially embedded beliefs powerfully influence how disability is understood and how opportunities are distributed. For example, several participants with disabilities described being pitied or overprotected because disability was framed by others as a divine test, moral burden, or consequence of parental sin (such as evident in Aisha’s story section 5.3.3). Such religiously inflected social interpretation structures everyday interactions, often leading to infantilisation, guilt, or shame within families, thereby constraining opportunities for education, mobility, and participation. In these instances, religion acts as a social conversion factor (Sen, 1999) that restricts the transformation of formal opportunities into real capabilities by legitimising exclusionary attitudes. This is further supported by Dixon (2023), Naznin and Tabassum (2021), and Singal et al. (2011), who note that, in the study context, disability is sometimes interpreted as a curse, a divine punishment, or a consequence of parental sins. Such externally imposed beliefs function as social conversion factors (Sen, 1999), reinforcing stigma and constraining opportunities for inclusion.

Religion also shapes institutional behaviour. Stakeholder 8’s narrative (section 6.2.1) revealed that some employers hire PWDs as an act of religious merit (Swab in Urdu), rather than as a recognition of rights. While well-intentioned, this charity-based framing often results in paternalistic treatment, limited role allocation, or symbolic inclusion rather than full participation. Similarly, reliance on zakat-based welfare systems rather than enforceable rights can reinforce dependency by positioning PWDs as recipients of benevolence rather than as citizens entitled to equitable opportunities (British Council, 2019). These dynamics demonstrate how religiously informed social and institutional norms influence whether public policies, rights, or resources can be effectively converted into the capability for equitable inclusion.

Thus, religion acts as a dual-level converter, simultaneously shaping inner aspirations and external social environments. This duality helps explain why religion emerged in this study as both enabling and constraining: it supports agency and community-oriented action while also mediating societal attitudes and institutional behaviour. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that religion in Pakistan operates through dual pathways: it shapes individuals' psychological dispositions (personal conversion factor) while simultaneously structuring the social norms, community interactions, and institutional practices that enable or constrain capability formation (social conversion factor). Recognising religion as both a personal and social conversion factor therefore provides a more complete understanding of how capabilities are shaped in religiously sensitive contexts.

Traditional CA literature has largely overlooked religion in its taxonomy of conversion factors. Sen (1999, p. 70), for instance, identifies five sources of variation in converting inputs into functionings, none of which address religion. Likewise, Robeyns (2005, 2017) and Crocker and Robeyns (2009) exclude religion from their classifications of personal, social, and environmental conversion factors. As Deneulin and Davies (2018) point out, religion remains absent in capability debates. Where it does appear, it is usually framed as a capability or dimension of wellbeing: Nussbaum (2011) includes "religious affiliation” among the central capabilities, Alkire (2002) treats religion as one dimension of human development, and Trani et al. (2011) identify freedom of religion as a valued aspect of wellbeing for PWDs in Afghanistan.

This study argues that in religiously sensitive contexts, religion must also be theorised as a conversion factor. Specifically, it shows how religious beliefs function as *personal conversion factors* that cultivate resilience, hope, and self-determination. Participants drew strength from beliefs such as “*God helps those who help themselves*,” which enabled them to sustain aspirations despite systemic barriers. In this way, religion did not merely shape what people value “to be and do” but also enhanced their capacity to pursue those valued goals. While Mutanga (2015) shows how students developed resilience through faith, and Trani et al. (2011) note the contextual role of religion in Afghanistan, neither explicitly frames religion as a conversion factor shaping agency and achievements.

Thus, the contribution of this research is twofold. Conceptually, it extends the Capability Approach by recognising religion as a conversion factor – a mediating condition that can enable or constrain agency. Empirically, it provides grounded evidence from Pakistan that highlights how religion can foster resilience and aspiration among PWDs, while also revealing the ambivalent role of religion when interpreted through more punitive social lenses.

Having examined how conversion factors operate in both enabling and constraining ways, it is now essential to reflect on their broader significance.

9.3.3 Significance of Identified Conversion Factors for Disability Literature

The empirical exploration of diverse conversion factors in this study demonstrates that the Capability Approach can encompass core tenets of established disability models (Mutanga, 2015). The discussion of impairment acknowledges the medical model by recognising the role of bodily conditions as personal conversion factors. At the same time, the analysis of structural conversion factors aligns with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996), which locates disadvantage in societal and institutional barriers. Beyond these perspectives, the findings reveal a nuanced interaction between impairment and social, cultural, infrastructural, and institutional conditions in Pakistan, resonating with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model (WHO, 2001). This study empirically extends the ICF framework by showing how disability is dynamically co-constructed through local meaning systems and societal structures, rather than being a fixed attribute of the individual. These findings also endorse Bickenbach's (2014) argument that the ICF model could be enriched through alignment with the Capability Approach. Taken together, the study contributes to the broader disability literature by demonstrating the integrative potential of the Capability Approach to bridge multiple theoretical models and provide empirically grounded insights into the lived experience of disability.

9.3.4 Significance of Identified Conversion Factors for Capability Literature

The empirical investigation of conversion factors has remained relatively underexplored within Capability Approach literature, where discussions often remain largely theoretical (Hick, 2016). Existing empirical work has tended to focus on inequalities in developed welfare state contexts (Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018), with limited attention to how institutional mechanisms shape the conversion process. Moreover, most CA-informed disability studies have emphasised the restrictive role of conversion factors (Ton et al., 2019; Trani et al., 2011), overlooking their potential to enable agency. This study addresses these gaps by identifying two such enabling factors – family support and religion – that significantly foster agency for PWDs in Pakistan. Moreover, this study empirically establishes the link between agency and conversion factors, as theoretically proposed by Bazzani (2023), whose proposal had previously lacked empirical application. By highlighting how conversion factors are socially and institutionally embedded, these findings respond to limitations identified by capability scholars (e.g., Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018; Ibrahim, 2017; Leßmann, 2022) concerning the Capability Approach's treatment of social structures. This contribution helps expand the explanatory scope of the Capability Approach, showing how conversion factors can both constrain and enable agency in contextually specific ways – a theme further developed in answering the third research question.

9.3.5 Methodological Significance of Identified Conversion Factors

This study expands the explanatory capacity of the Capability Approach by using an institutional perspective to enrich the understanding of conversion factors. Earlier applications of this integration include Bass et al. (2013) in the context of information and communication technology for development and Nambiar (2013) in assessing the capabilities of the poor in Malaysia. To my knowledge, CA-based disability studies have not yet drawn explicitly on Scott's (2013) three-pillar framework to analyse conversion factors (Sen, 1992; Robeyns, 2017). Empirical identification of conversion factors is methodologically significant as it supports the operationalisation of the capability approach, thus alleviating the abstract nature of CA into observable reality. Critics such as Gasper (2002, pp. 444–452) and Deneulin (2008) argue that CA lacks ontological grounding, as it often conceptualises capabilities apart from social history, culture, and institutions. Scott’s (2013) notions grant stronger ontological grounding to a CA analysis by clarifying how conversion factors operate through institutional mechanisms. For example, while CA typically groups legislation and social norms under “social conversion factors,” applying Scott’s framework allows for finer categorisation: legislation aligns with the regulative pillar, while norms and shared beliefs correspond to the normative and cultural-cognitive pillars. This disaggregation brings greater conceptual precision to understanding how institutions shape the conversion of resources into capabilities. In this sense, the study contributes methodologically by drawing on Scott’s three-pillar framework to strengthen the ontological grounding of capabilities. Considering institutional effects also addresses critiques of ‘methodological individualism’ in CA (Evans, 2002; Gore, 1997; Pitasse Fragoso, 2025; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002), by showing how individual freedoms are embedded within broader institutional environments.

The theoretical enrichment of the Capability Approach, together with its empirical application in this study, contributes to addressing the conceptual research question of how empirical insights can enhance the theoretical development of the CA.

9.3.6 Policy Significance of Identified Conversion Factors

This study highlights how conversion factors, both constraining and enabling, shape the freedoms and capabilities of persons with disabilities. Structural barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, weak enforcement of disability laws, disability stigma, gendered norms, segregated education, and workplace discrimination constrain agency and limit capability achievement. At the same time, enabling factors such as family support, religion, and the activism of civil society groups provide crucial resources for resilience and aspiration, partially compensating for institutional gaps. The policy significance lies in recognising this duality: expanding freedoms requires not only dismantling sources of unfreedom (Sen, 1992) but also strengthening and partnering with enabling forces that already operate in the lives of PWDs. Such an integrated strategy is essential for supporting the flourishing of a dignified human life for persons with disabilities, rather than relying on fragmented or siloed interventions. Policy must therefore reduce institutional barriers while also leveraging enabling factors – for example, supporting families, engaging with religious and cultural frameworks, and resourcing OPDs and civil society organisations. In doing so, policy design can better reflect the lived realities of PWDs and align with the Capability Approach's emphasis on holistic human development (Sen, 1999).

9.3.7 Concluding Remarks on Research Question 2

This section has empirically examined how the broader societal and institutional context interacts with individual agency, creating either enabling or disabling conditions for capability achievement. Agency, understood here as the capacity to pursue and attain what individuals value, does not operate in a vacuum but is profoundly shaped by external and internal conversion factors. This sets the foundation for the next section, which delves more deeply into the role of agency among PWDs, exploring the diverse ways they adapt, negotiate, resist, and transform their environments in the pursuit of valued goals.

9.4 Pathways of Agency Among Persons with Disabilities

The discussion of the third research question – *What strategies do PWDs employ to navigate contextual and institutional challenges in achieving their work and life goals?* – provides an opportunity to explore the notion of ‘agency’ among PWDs in a versatile and nuanced manner. The findings, presented across Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, highlight the diverse forms of agency enacted by the participants with disabilities. These range from critical reflections on their social realities to everyday actions, negotiations, adaptations, subversion, resistance, and resilience. Agency, as reflected in participants' narratives, manifests in two distinct pathways: first, as a reactive mechanism to cope with prevailing barriers; and second, as proactive, through deliberate, goal-centric efforts to envision and build a better future. Moreover, the findings assert that agency manifests not only at the individual level but also at the collective level to counter entrenched structural barriers.

Agency – in the Capability Approach – is conceptualised as an individual’s capacity to make choices and act upon them in pursuit of goals, such as their own well-being or the advancement of others’ well-being (Sen, 1992, 1995). Agency underpins the entire logic and process of the Capability Approach (Crocker, 2008). The findings of this study illuminate the powerful role of PWDs’ agency. The absence of agency has been a significant limitation and a key criticism of earlier models guiding disability research, as highlighted by Shakespeare and Watson (2021). Within the medical model, the agency of PWDs is effectively negated (Watson, 2019). In contrast, while the social model rightly shifts attention to structural and societal barriers, it often does so at the expense of recognising individual agency (Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011; Terzi, 2004; Watson, 2019). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) model represents an attempt to reconcile the medical and social models; however, the ICF has limitations in fully capturing aspects such as individual choice and agency in the lives of PWDs, as indicated by Bickenbach (2014). Bickenbach (2014) also proposes reconciling the ICF with the Capability Approach to address the ICF's lack of a theory of justice and its failure to incorporate choice and the personal goals of PWDs. Thus, the central role of agency within the Capability Approach positions it more favourably than other models of disability. The vital role of agency in the Capability Approach allows this study to explore how the agency of PWDs is manifested in the empirical findings and how it is discussed within the extant literature. The discussion begins by examining the agency manifested in everyday life encounters before moving on to consider the more deliberate, goal-centric expressions of agency highlighted in this study.

9.4.1 Navigating Daily Realities: Expressions of Individual Agency

The findings highlight the reactive role of PWDs' agency in navigating diverse life situations. The agency of PWDs appears to be embedded in subtle aspects of everyday life, which do not always involve strong decision-making. In such situations, their agency is more about survival, adaptation, negotiation, and resilience, rather than being goal-oriented. The findings – presented in Chapters Six and Seven – unveil the employment and educational challenges faced by PWDs and explore how they navigated these obstacles. However, within the Capability Approach (Sen, 1995), agency is conceptualised primarily as choice- and goal-oriented (Crocker, 2008). Individuals are seen as agents in terms of their ability to choose and to transform capabilities into functionings (Garcés, 2020). The findings of this study suggest that conceptualising agency solely in terms of choice or goal-orientation overlooks expressions of agency that emerge in response to day-to-day challenges and the navigation of hurdles that do not necessarily align with predetermined goals. This interpretation finds support in Rebughini's (2023) argument that agency should not always be seen as the capacity to achieve; it should also be understood as the ability to navigate constraints and negotiate challenges in innovative ways. Building on this perspective, some of the actions and strategies observed in this study do not fit neatly within the CA's notion of agency, as the framework's existing toolkit does not sufficiently capture these forms of agency. Given this limitation in the Capability Approach's treatment of agency, this study draws on Katz's (2001) triadic framework of resilience, reworking, and resistance – along with other social science perspectives – to provide a more nuanced account of how the agency of PWDs is manifested in daily life situations. In doing so, this study addresses the conceptual research question by demonstrating how the findings extend the Capability Approach's understanding of agency.

The following empirical accounts illustrate forms of agency that are not easily captured by the goal-oriented framing of agency within the Capability Approach.

Nadia (in Section 6.4.1) mentioned issues of inaccessibility and described how she adapted her environment to create more comfortable conditions for herself. This participant's agency primarily reflects resilience – enduring and adapting under unsupportive conditions – and reworking – modifying her immediate environment to make life more manageable (Katz, 2001). Similarly, Nabeel (in Section 5.3.1) highlighted that despite the lower salary, he decided to accept the job. Nabeel's choice embodies resilience – enduring structural barriers by adapting to an imperfect opportunity – and, to a lesser extent, reworking (Katz, 2001), by strategically using available options instead of staying unemployed and potentially creating pathways for future advancement. Some PWDs exercise their agency to confront existing oppressive conditions. Bilal (in Section 6.4.1), while discussing the disabling conditions of his workplace – where he had to crawl every day to reach his second-floor office – asserted: *"I decided to quit this daily insult."* Similarly, Abid (in Section 5.3.2) stated: *"I decided to challenge the decision of my unfair dismissal in court."* These actions highlight how troubled social conditions can instigate agentic practices. Their actions represent resistance (Katz, 2001): a confrontational effort to challenge unjust power structures through legal means. They also demonstrate an underlying resilience in refusing to accept unfair treatment. Both Bilal's and Abid's decisions represent critical moments of realisation – what Freire (1970) describes as conscientization, and what Denzin (2013) refers to as moments of epiphany – where individuals reinterpret their situation, recognise their oppression, and choose to assert their agency. These instances also highlight the impact of social conditions on shaping and enabling human agency, which Giddens (1991) conceptualises as a 'reflexive project of the self'.

However, not all PWDs were able to exhibit resistance or resilience; some instead chose to adapt and settle within the constraints of their circumstances. For Fatima and Sidra (in Section 7.3.1), the decision to leave medical school and computer sciences, respectively, stemmed from a realisation that these domains were not perceived as accessible or welcoming for disabled people. This reflects the habitual aspect of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), wherein agents tend to produce actions based on past patterns of thought and behaviour, thereby maintaining the existing social order. It also indicates that social constraints are reproduced through the application of learned dispositions, closely aligning with Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of habitus and with Giddens’ (1984) concept of re-enacting. This tendency also resonates with the Capability Approach's concept of adaptive preferences (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 1999), wherein individuals adjust their preferences downward to align with the constraints imposed by unjust social arrangements. These diverse situations highlight that the conceptualisation of agency is far more complex, particularly under conditions of oppression. Agency cannot always be understood solely as purposeful or deliberate action – a notion commonly associated with agency within the Capability Approach (Garza-Vázquez, 2022).

Few studies within the Capability Approach have explored the agency of PWDs in interpreting and navigating their social realities. For instance, Ton et al. (2021a) examined the agency of PWDs during disasters, while Mutanga (2015) highlighted the resilience and agency of disabled students as they navigated higher education institutions. Although these studies remain primarily oriented toward goal-centric expressions of agency – a common emphasis within the

Capability Approach – the findings of the current study also illuminate more subtle and less goal-directed forms of agency.

The discussion now turns to the goal-directed manifestations of agency demonstrated by PWDs in this study.

9.4.2 Goal-Oriented Expressions of Individual Agency

Findings across Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight challenge the portrayal of persons with disabilities as passive individuals, a depiction commonly associated with the medical and charity models of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). These models have historically cast PWDs as dependent recipients of care or pity. Such perceptions remain prevalent in Pakistan, where persons with disabilities are frequently positioned as dependents rather than as rights-holders (Ali, 2024; British Council, 2019; Dixon, 2023). By contrast, the participants with disabilities in this study demonstrate purposeful goals and a firm resolve to shape a better future. Their actions highlight the importance of recognising PWDs as active agents whose aspirations and capabilities are constrained not by their impairments, but by the structural and institutional barriers that surround them.

Chapter Eight highlights the motivations and concerted efforts of these individuals to transform social conditions within Pakistani society, aiming to make it more equitable to achieve a dignified life. Ali and Nadeem (in Section 8.2) mentioned that the static state of social conditions prompted them to come forward and speak about disability rights. Similarly, Sana, Rabia, Usman, Zara, and Fatima (in Section 8.3) described their efforts to support other PWDs in overcoming disability-related challenges, thereby enhancing their collective prospects for inclusion in mainstream society and contributing to a more equitable environment for their broader community. These projective aspects of their agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) reflect how PWDs sought to disassociate themselves from routine patterns and imagined an alternative, equitable future. This reflects the awakening of critical agency (Freire, 1970; Ibrahim, 2017), through which PWDs embody acts of resistance against the status quo (Katz, 2001) and demonstrate a fierce determination to reshape their futures, challenging the injustices that sought to define their lives.

These findings point to three significant dimensions of agency within Sen's Capability Framework. First, they illustrate the instrumental role of agency (Sen, 1995), as participants mobilised their actions to expand freedoms for themselves and others. Second, they highlight the diversity of agency goals – both self-regarding and other-regarding – a distinctive feature of Sen's approach. Third, they emphasise the process aspect of agency freedom, where individuals actively participate in reshaping their lives and resisting structural constraints.

First and foremost, the narratives of PWDs underscore the importance they attach to being agents of their own change, rather than passive recipients of support. This aligns with Sen's (1990, 1992) conception of agency, which recognises individuals as active agents in shaping their lives. In terms of Crocker's (2008) distinction, the experiences of PWDs reflect instrumental agency success – achievements attained through their own efforts – rather than realised agency success, where valued goals are met through the actions of others. Instrumental agency success (Sen, 1992) reflects individuals as the driving force behind their achievements. This was strongly evident in participants' insistence on self-representation, as illustrated by Bilal (in Section 8.2): "*We don't want anyone else to become our mouthpiece, as no one understands our needs and limitations better than we do*." Such statements highlight the value placed on direct, participatory action in pursuing aspirations. However, it is essential to note that an exclusive focus on instrumental agency risks idealising individual effort, particularly in contexts where structural barriers remain pervasive. While participants with disabilities displayed pride in being active authors of their own lives, their narratives also underscored the weight of systemic constraints and the urgent need for structural transformation. From this perspective, realised agency success – achieved when valued outcomes are made possible through institutional or policy changes – remains essential for the long-term advancement of PWDs. Thus, the findings suggest a tension between participants' reliance on instrumental agency in the short term and the structural supports required to secure more sustainable forms of realised agency success.

The diversity of agency goals reflected in the narratives of PWDs – including the pursuit of both personal aspirations and those aimed at the well-being of others – aligns closely with Sen's conception of agency (Sen, 1999). Sen (1985, p. 206) notes that agency goals are grounded in a person's 'conception of the good', which may relate to one's own well-being or that of others. For instance, Junaid and Nabeel (in Section 8.2) described guiding other PWDs in navigating daily challenges. This aspect of agency – where the agent can also act in pursuit of others' well-being – is a distinctive feature of the Capability Approach, setting it apart from traditional conceptions of agency in the social sciences (Robeyns, 2017). This reflects the multi-motivator nature of agency within the Capability Approach, as suggested by Garcés (2020). The Capability Approach broadens the vision of the agent from being a mere maximiser of self-pursuit towards a more social welfare-oriented actor (Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). In this way, the Capability Approach brings wider social goals within the bounds of agency, resonating with Crocker and Robeyns (2009), Garcés (2020), and Pelenc et al. (2015), who argue that agency within the Capability Approach has a more liberating role than merely the pursuit of self-interest.

The findings further show how personal and social goals can be intertwined: supporting others was also a pathway for participants to gain respect and inclusion themselves. This resonates with Sen's (1999, p. 271) observation that there is "*an element of one's 'self' involved in the pursuit of social commitments.*" The study thus adds to the CA disability literature by highlighting this underexplored connection between personal and social goals in the agency of PWDs.

The findings underscore the process aspect of agency (Alkire, 2008; Crocker and Robeyns, 2009). Although agency within the Capability Approach is often conceptualised and operationalised in terms of individuals' ability to make choices (Frediani, 2010; Garza-Vázquez, 2022), Sen's own writings go further, emphasising the transformative power of agency to shape social conditions. As he notes, development requires that "*people have to be seen, in this perspective, as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs*" (Sen, 1999, p. 53). Despite this, both general and disability-focused CA literature have paid insufficient attention to the process aspect of agency. Disability-CA scholarship in particular has remained predominantly conceptual (e.g., Bellanca et al., 2011; Mitra, 2006, 2017; Norwich, 2014; Riddle, 2020) or has centred on opportunity freedoms – such as access to social arrangements – to assess well-being, inequality, or development policy (Bakhshi and Trani, 2019; Biggeri et al., 2011; Trani et al., 2011, 2018). While this emphasis resonates with the logic of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996), it risks reinforcing a narrow focus on external opportunities rather than recognising the active processes through which individuals shape their lives. By empirically examining how PWDs in Pakistan enact agency in ways that deliberately reshape their social realities, this study helps rebalance the CA’s emphasis. It demonstrates that to capture the true essence of the Capability Approach, attention must be paid not only to opportunities but also to the process freedoms through which individuals navigate constraints and pursue innovative strategies. This becomes particularly crucial in resource-constrained contexts like Pakistan, where opportunities to ‘be and do’ are severely limited, yet agency continues to flourish. Moreover, this also aligns with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for the inclusion and participation of marginalised groups in their own development (United Nations, 2015).

In Nussbaum’s framework (2011), agency is treated as a discrete capability – primarily associated with the capabilities of practical reasoning and control over one’s environment. By contrast, the findings of this study suggest that agency is not simply one capability among others, but a foundational force that underlies and enables the pursuit and realisation of multiple capabilities. For the participants with disabilities, agency was exercised not only to achieve personal aspirations but also to support others in their communities. Viewing the agency solely as a standalone capability risk underestimates its pervasive and enabling role. From this perspective, agency is better understood not as a capability per se, nor as a conversion factor, but as a cross-cutting force that stimulates and sustains capability development. Furthermore, Nussbaum's account offers limited space for the diversity of agency goals, as it tends to privilege self-directed ends over collective or impersonal aims. While earlier philosophical critiques have noted this limitation (Crocker, 2008), few empirical studies have demonstrated how the agency of persons with disabilities extends beyond self-interest to encompass the well-being of others.

However, it is pertinent to note that the role of agency as a significant force in achieving capabilities and expanding process freedom should not obscure the responsibility of institutions. Individuals alone cannot be expected to overcome structural barriers. As earlier chapters demonstrate, persons with disabilities have diverse and unique resource needs that the broader institutional setup must support. Families, employers, the state, and civil society actors all play crucial roles in providing the flexible social support nets that enable people to exercise their agency meaningfully. The findings, therefore, highlight a dual dynamic: while PWDs demonstrate resilience and innovation in navigating constraints, sustainable capability expansion ultimately requires both the dismantling of institutional barriers and the provision of adequate resources. In this sense, agency and structural support are not alternatives but complementary elements in advancing the freedoms of PWDs. Thus, agency and institutions should not be seen as competing explanations but as mutually reinforcing forces: persons with disabilities mobilise their agency to challenge discriminatory practices and advocate for change. At the same time, institutional reforms provide the support through which the agency can be sustained and scaled. Genuine capability expansion, therefore, depends on the interaction between empowered agency and enabling institutional environments.

This dynamic also leads into the next section, which focuses on the collective nature of agency. While individual agency is crucial, it is not sufficient on its own to destabilise entrenched structural inequalities, as noted by Kabeer (2021). To achieve their goals, individuals often need to generate new resources or foster enabling social arrangements – tasks that extend beyond the capacity of individual agency and call for collective mobilisation (Evans, 2002).

9.4.3 Pursuing Common Goals: Expressions of Collective Agency

This section explores the collective dimensions of agency among PWDs, highlighting how solidarity and shared goals drive grassroots mobilisation. Participants with disabilities narratives (in Sections 5.3.4 and 8.4) illustrate how they joined hands with peers to establish self-support organisations dedicated to disability advocacy and activism. These accounts highlight the deeper motivations that inspired them to unite around a shared cause – the pursuit of disability rights and inclusion. Such peer-led initiatives emerge as powerful responses to systemic exclusion, fostering dignity and belonging through collective contribution.

There is limited Capability Approach literature on collective agency (Garza-Vázquez, 2022), particularly in relation to disability. Non-disability studies, however, highlight its significance in advancing the well-being of marginalised groups. For example, Tiwari (2017) showed how women's self-help groups in rural India countered oppressive structures, while Ibrahim (2006, 2014) documented how poor communities in Egypt mobilised collective action to improve well-being and abolish female genital mutilation. The relative dearth of CA-based literature on collective agency can be attributed to Sen's writings, which are not explicit about 'collective agency' because of the framework's individual-centric orientation. While Sen (1999) acknowledges that agency goals may extend beyond self-interest and stresses the role of public deliberation and democratic processes – inherently collective phenomena – his emphasis ultimately remains on individual capabilities as the primary evaluative space (Sen, 1992). Even when writing with Professor Jean Drèze, drawing on case studies of rural poor in India to show how local action can reshape social norms (Drèze and Sen, 2002, p. 368), this insight was not developed into a sustained theorisation of collective agency. This limitation has been highlighted as a significant shortcoming of the Capability Approach (Deneulin, 2008; Evans, 2002; Ibrahim, 2017; Stewart, 2005).

The findings of this study help address this limitation by empirically establishing the significance of collective agency in promoting capabilities for PWDs within the context of Pakistan. These collective initiatives (highlighted in sections 5.3.4 and 8.4) appear to be capability-enriching by providing networks for disseminating information about existing opportunities, working with institutions to foster disability-inclusive practices, raising awareness among the public to reduce discrimination and stigma, advocating at political forums, and offering emotional support to members. These initiatives reflect multiple forms of agency (Katz, 2001): resilience, as individuals supported each other in navigating daily challenges; reworking, as they created new structures of mutual aid across education, employment, emotional well-being, and legal awareness; and resistance, as they engaged in social activism to challenge ingrained societal and institutional mindsets about disability. In this way, collective agency generates enabling social resources (such as peer networks and advocacy platforms) while simultaneously operating as a social conversion factor by combating stigma (Robeyns, 2017). Ultimately, these dynamics contribute to the creation of common goods (Ostrom, 1990) through the exercise of collective agency (Garza-Vázquez, 2022). In doing so, the findings highlight how PWDs themselves mobilise to remove sources of unfreedom, thereby affirming Sen's foundational principle that people are both the means and the ends of development (Sen, 1992, 1999).

What began as individual efforts gradually evolved into vital networks of support, advocacy, and empowerment through collective action. In a context such as Pakistan, where institutional support is often lacking, these peer-led initiatives are not just filling a gap; they are redefining what meaningful support looks like, rooted in empathy, lived experience, and shared struggle. For many, these self-support groups have become critical structural resources – spaces of hope and resilience. These findings strongly echo the disability rights slogan, 'Nothing about us, without us' (Charlton, 1998), and align with the broader agenda of the United Nations, which advocates for the exercise of agency by PWDs. Article 29 of the UNCRPD (2006) firmly asserts that the effective participation of PWDs in the civil and political life of society is a fundamental right, essential for achieving genuine inclusion and equality.

While the discussion (in Section 9.3.1) indicates that normative "soft" mechanisms such as the UNCRPD have limited traction in directly enforcing disability inclusion in Pakistan, their significance should not be dismissed entirely. At the state level, these frameworks often remain symbolic, producing commitments without substantive implementation. Yet, at the grassroots level, they provide essential discursive and moral leverage. For self-help and advocacy groups, the CRPD offers a legitimising framework that strengthens their claims, empowers mobilisation, and creates a moral benchmark against which governments and institutions can be held accountable. Thus, the role of normative frameworks is best understood as limited in regulative enforcement but enabling in the sphere of collective advocacy.

9.4.3.1 Outcomes of Collective Agency

The exercise of collective agency by PWDs has led to the emergence of self-help groups and disability welfare organisations, commonly referred to as Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). These groups represent more than informal solidarity; they embody institutionalised forms of grassroots mobilisation created and sustained by PWDs themselves. The rise of OPDs demonstrates how collective agency moves beyond individual resilience to establish enduring organisational structures that advocate for rights, inclusion, and social change.

Collective efforts of this kind generate outcomes that can be understood in two interrelated ways. First, they create common goods – shared resources that are non-excludable and non-rivalrous, sustained through community cooperation (Garza-Vázquez, 2022; Nebel et al., 2022; Ostrom, 1990). These include peer networks, advocacy platforms, shared knowledge, and solidarity, all of which benefit not only their members but also the broader PWD community. Second, these outcomes can be conceptualised as enabling social conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017). By combating stigma, strengthening voice and participation, fostering disability-inclusive practices, and providing emotional support, OPDs actively transform disabling social contexts into enabling ones. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how collective agency contributes not only to the creation of common goods – such as OPDs, peer networks, and advocacy platforms – but also to their function as enabling conversion factors that combat stigma, strengthen voice, and expand capabilities.

The structural impact of these OPDs and self-help groups is already evident in Pakistan's social landscape. As highlighted in Sections 5.3.4 and 8.4, these networks are lobbying and engaging in political advocacy, aligning with Articles 4(3) and 33 of the UNCRPD, which mandate the involvement of PWD-led organisations in implementing and monitoring disability rights (CRPD, 2018; UN, 2006). Their activism played a key role in the passage of Pakistan's Disability Rights Act 2020, which mandated the removal of derogatory terms from official documents and addressed long-standing structural barriers (Kizilbash, 2020; Ministry of Human Rights, 2020). The role of grassroots disability activism in shaping structural change in Pakistan resonates with historical precedents, as national and international organisations of and for persons with disabilities also played a pivotal role in drafting what the UN General Assembly eventually adopted as the CRPD in 2006 (Degener, 2016; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018).

These dynamics resonate with Giddens's (1984, p. 14) notion of agency as the power to "make a difference" to a pre-existing state of affairs. In this sense, these networks emerging from within the community act as enabling structural resources or conversion factors, illustrating the potential of collective agency to dismantle sources of unfreedom (Sen, 1999) and to foster a dignified life for PWDs.

9.4.4 Empirical and Methodological Significance of Agency Dynamics

This study advances the understanding of agency within the Capability Approach by engaging with conceptual insights from the social sciences and drawing on Katz's (2001) framework. Previous CA scholarship has often relied on Rowlands' (1997) typology of power, a framework widely applied by Kabeer (1999), Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), and Ton (2021). While valuable, this typology does not fully capture the everyday practices through which marginalised individuals navigate and transform oppressive conditions. Katz's (2001) framework of resilience, reworking, and resistance provides a more dynamic lens, illuminating how persons with disabilities negotiate constraints, forge new social arrangements, and challenge exclusionary structures. Methodologically, this study shows the importance of adopting such process-sensitive frameworks in CA research. By capturing subtle and often invisible practices of resilience, reworking, and resistance, Katz's (2001) categories enrich the operationalisation of agency within the Capability Approach, moving beyond opportunity-focused evaluations to reveal how marginalised groups actively reshape their socio-political environments.

Within the social sciences, agency is broadly understood as a process of social action and transformation (Giddens, 1991). Yet, this dynamic and recursive understanding of agency has been underdeveloped in CA theorisation (Leßmann, 2022). Sen (1992, 1999) primarily framed agency in terms of choice and goal pursuit, with CA scholars such as Robeyns (2005, 2017) further emphasising how social contexts influence the choice aspect of agency. While this literature highlights the influence of structures on agency, less attention has been paid to the reverse process: how agency actively transforms structures and creates new enabling conditions. The findings of this study address this gap by providing an empirical account of how both individual and collective agency contribute to transforming structural conditions in Pakistan. Through the formation of self-help groups and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), participants with disabilities not only supported one another but also lobbied for rights-based reforms, such as the Disability Rights Act of 2020. These initiatives illustrate how agency generates enabling social resources or conversion factors (Robeyns, 2017) that expand capabilities for the broader disability community. In doing so, they exemplify what Giddens (1984) termed the *duality of structure*: while social structures shape agency, agency can also reshape structures. Sen himself hinted at such a recursive process, noting that "*individual freedom is quintessentially a social product that emerges from the two-way relationship between social arrangements and the use of individual freedoms to improve them*" (Sen, 1999, p. 31). Yet this recursive interplay has not been systematically theorised within the Capability Approach, and empirical demonstrations remain rare.

Although theoretical propositions have been developed within Capability-inspired disability literature (Ballet et al., 2011; Biggeri and Ferrannini, 2014; Trani et al., 2011), there remains a lack of evidence on how individual and collective efforts contribute to societal change and the expansion of institutional freedoms and capabilities. By demonstrating how PWDs mobilise agency to dismantle barriers, create new enabling resources, and transform disabling environments, this research responds to critiques of the CA's alleged 'structural individualism' (Deneulin, 2008). It establishes how agency and structure are recursively linked, echoing the calls of Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018), Leßmann (2022), and De La Ossa Guerra and Botero Delgado (2024) to theorise feedback loops within the Capability Approach. The findings also complement recent scholarship highlighting the importance of collective agency in capability expansion (Ibrahim, 2006, 2017), while extending it by evidencing how collective mobilisation generates institutional change in practice.

Taken together, these contributions establish a clearer understanding of agency as both a means of survival under constraint and a transformative force that reshapes institutional contexts. This reconceptualisation of agency not only enriches the Capability Approach theoretically but also offers a methodological pathway for future empirical research to capture how marginalised groups reshape their social worlds.

9.4.5 Policy Significance and Concluding Remarks on Question 3

The findings on individual and collective agency, along with their outcomes, hold important policy implications. They demonstrate that the enabling conditions policies often seek to establish, such as inclusion, empowerment and access, cannot be achieved without the active grassroots participation of PWDs and their representative organisations. Collective agency generates critical enabling conditions that policies often aim to create but struggle to realise in the absence of a bottom-up approach. The emergence of community-driven enabling conditions highlights the urgent need for participatory policy frameworks that formally recognise and support grassroots mechanisms. However, this recognition of grassroots agency should not absolve institutions of their responsibility. Policies must not outsource inclusion to PWDs themselves but instead provide the structural, financial, and legal scaffolding within which grassroots initiatives can flourish. In this way, sustainable social transformation requires a dual approach: empowering and nurturing the agency of PWDs while ensuring that institutions remain fully accountable for dismantling barriers and delivering on their obligations.

9.4.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined the complex and dynamic interplay between capabilities, agency, and structural conditions in the lives of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. By grounding the discussion in empirical evidence, it advances a deeper understanding of how these elements are interwoven within the Capability Approach framework. The discussion responds to calls by Hvinden and Halvorsen (2018) and Bazzani (2023) to demonstrate the role of conversion factors in mediating the agency–structure relationship, empirically showing how these dynamics can generate both vicious and virtuous circles that either reinforce cycles of disadvantage or enable empowerment. With little evidence of effective top-down action, meaningful social change in Pakistan is gradually emerging from the grassroots agency of persons with disabilities, who create enabling structural resources that expand their valued capabilities. This illustrates that, under certain conditions, the active agency and participation of disadvantaged groups can transform social and political structures. These insights carry important policy implications, underscoring the need for participatory approaches that recognise and nurture the grassroots agency of persons with disabilities as a vital force for expanding capabilities and enabling a flourishing life.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This study initially set out to explore the work aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. However, as the fieldwork progressed, it became clear that aspirations related to work could not be meaningfully understood in isolation from other life domains. As a result, the research question was broadened to reflect these lived complexities. Nonetheless, the domain of work and workplace participation remains central to this study. Work is treated not only as a site of aspiration, but also as a space through which questions of dignity, recognition, and equitable inclusion can be meaningfully traced. To fully understand access to work opportunities, the study examines how intersecting life domains – such as education and community participation – and their associated structural and contextual factors mediate the conditions under which persons with disabilities pursue and experience work. Taken together, the findings highlight the interconnected nature of these domains and demonstrate how individuals' capabilities – related not only to work but to broader aspects of life – are developed, enabled, or suppressed within wider socio-cultural and institutional environment. The thesis therefore offers a holistic account of the aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan, showing how agency, structural constraints, and contextual realities converge to shape their possibilities for living a dignified human life.

To broaden the understanding of this complex phenomenon, the study included not only the voices of PWDs but also the perspectives of key disability stakeholders, thereby illuminating the wider contextual dynamics that shape the experiences of PWDs. The Capability Approach was operationalised to develop a theoretical understanding of these lived experiences at the intersection of well-being, structural conditions, and human agency. In addition to exploring these experiences, the study aimed to identify implications for disability policy, with the broader goal of promoting social justice for PWDs in the Pakistani context. In doing so, the research responds to the United Nations' pledge in the preamble of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: 'no one will be left behind' (United Nations, 2015). The findings offer a contextually grounded contribution not only to disability studies, but also to capability studies and organisational studies – particularly in a setting where deep-seated inequalities continue to restrict opportunities and freedoms for PWDs at work and in other domains of life.

10.2 Research Rationale

While the initial motivation for this study was to explore the work aspirations of persons with disabilities in Pakistan, the research rationale developed inductively as the fieldwork unfolded. PWDs' narratives revealed that aspirations related to work were deeply entangled with wider structural, cultural, and institutional conditions. As a result, the study adopted a broader lens, allowing the research rationale to emerge in a bottom-up manner – grounded in the contextual realities PWDs navigate. This inductive approach not only strengthened the empirical depth of the study but also enriched its theoretical and policy relevance. From this inductive process, seven interrelated concerns emerged that not only reflect the lived realities of PWDs but also respond to gaps in organisational studies, disability literature and capability literature. Given the inductive orientation of this study, the research rationales are presented in the order in which they emerged

– from empirical and contextual insights toward broader theoretical considerations.

First, although research on disability and work is growing (Schur et al., 2017), it remains limited in several important ways. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on organisational-level barriers within Global North contexts, offering little insight into how workplace experiences are shaped by broader socio-cultural and institutional environments (Suresh and Dyaram, 2020). Scholars have also called for more interdisciplinary approaches to better capture the complexity of workplace inclusion (Jurado-Caraballo et al., 2022) and for greater attention to how country-specific conditions influence the workplace treatment of PWDs (Beatty et al., 2019). These gaps highlight the need for research that situates disability and work within wider contextual realities, particularly in underrepresented Global South settings.

Second, disability research remains heavily concentrated in the Global North, with scholars calling for more empirical studies from the Global South to address geographical and epistemological imbalances in the field (Grech and Soldatic, 2016; Mitra et al., 2013, 2017). This gap underscored the need for research that examines disability within underrepresented contexts and foregrounds locally situated meanings and experiences. In response, this study is situated in Pakistan to develop context-sensitive insights that reflect the social, cultural, and institutional specificities shaping the lives of persons with disabilities.

Third, earlier dominant models of disability – particularly the medical and social models – have been widely critiqued for their limited ability to capture the multi-layered and context-dependent nature of disability. In response to these limitations, the study adopts the Capability Approach as a more integrative framework that incorporates key insights from earlier models (Burchardt, 2004; Trani et al., 2011), while recognising that it too requires further theoretical enrichment to account for the contextual and structural complexities identified in this research.

Fourth, the study engages with critiques of the Capability Approach concerning its tendency toward structural individualism (Deneulin, 2008; Gangas, 2020). Empirical engagement reinforced these concerns, revealing strong institutional patterns – particularly in work and education – that shape the opportunities and constraints experienced by PWDs. This highlighted the need for an institutional lens within capability-based analysis. Accordingly, the study draws on Scott's (2013) framework to situate capabilities within their wider institutional environments and to more fully account for the contextual and structural dynamics shaping disability in Pakistan.

Fifth, prominent models of disability have been criticised for their lack of engagement with agency (Watson, 2019), and the Capability Approach has similarly been critiqued for conceptualising agency primarily as individual choice (Crocker, 2008; Garza-Vázquez, 2022), rather than as a force embedded in and oriented toward social transformation. Empirical engagement in this study reinforced these concerns, revealing forms of agency that extended beyond choice or autonomy to include resistance, adaptation, and collective efforts to reshape oppressive social structures. This highlighted the need for a more nuanced theoretical framing of agency within capability-based analysis. Accordingly, the study draws on Katz's (2001) typology of agency, Giddens' (1984) concept of structuration, and broader social science literature to conceptualise agency as both individual and collective, mutually constituted with the social structures in which it is embedded.

Sixth, existing Capability Approach–based disability studies largely remain within normative or conceptual debates, with limited use of the CA as an explanatory framework. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies that bridge the CA's normative commitments with its potential explanatory application (Robeyns, 2017). This gap highlights the need for research that operationalises the CA to examine how capabilities are enabled or constrained within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts, while still engaging with its normative and conceptual orientation.

Finally, although disability scholars such as Shakespeare and Watson (2021) have advocated for the use of critical realism in disability research alongside the Capability Approach, this body of work remains limited. This gap indicated the need for a theoretical approach capable of uncovering underlying mechanisms while recognising individual meaning-making. Accordingly, the study adopts a critical realist ontology in conjunction with the Capability Approach to investigate how structural and contextual forces shape aspirations and experiences within Pakistan.

10.3 Synthesis of Findings and Contributions to Knowledge

This research makes distinct contributions to the fields of organisational studies, disability studies and the Capability Approach by addressing empirical, conceptual, and theoretical gaps.

This study advances the disability-and-work field by adopting an explicitly interdisciplinary lens that integrates insights from sociology, disability studies, and development studies – particularly the Capability Approach – alongside management scholarship. This responds to calls for more diverse disciplinary perspectives to understand the complexity of workplace inclusion (Jurado-Caraballo et al., 2022). The study also addresses research gaps in organisational and diversity literature by examining how country-specific contexts shape the employment and treatment of PWDs (Beatty et al., 2019) and extends work on the discursive construction of disability within organisations (Elraz, 2018; Jammaers and Zanoni, 2020). While much existing research focuses on organisational-level barriers (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Vornholt et al., 2018), this study demonstrates that workplace experiences are deeply embedded in wider socio-cultural and institutional structures. By offering empirical insights from a resource-constrained Global South context (Chhabra, 2021; Ragadu and Rothmann, 2023; Suresh and Dyaram, 2020), it enriches disability and HRM debates (Cavanagh et al., 2017) and contributes a more contextually grounded and globally inclusive understanding of disability at work.

This thesis contributes to the still-limited body of empirical disability research from the Global South by offering one of the few in-depth qualitative studies that examines the aspirations and lived experiences of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. Existing research in such contexts tends to focus narrowly on barriers or welfare-oriented interventions, while major disability theories and rights frameworks – including the UNCRPD – are predominantly shaped by Global

North assumptions and applied universally (Meekosha and Soldatic, 2011). By grounding its analysis in Pakistan’s socio-cultural and institutional realities, this study challenges the dominance of Northern models and demonstrates how uncritical application of these frameworks can obscure local conditions and constraints (Grech and Soldatic 2016; Grue, 2019). The findings further highlight that while the UNCRPD (2006) emphasises equality of opportunities, the lived realities of PWDs in Pakistan call for equity of opportunities, acknowledging the differentiated support required for substantive inclusion. By centring Pakistani voices, the study foregrounds contextual factors – such as religion, family structures, and informal networks – that are often overlooked in mainstream disability discourse, thereby offering a more situated and globally inclusive understanding of disability.

The study provides empirical evidence that the Capability Approach, when theoretically enriched, offers a more comprehensive and integrative framework that effectively incorporates key insights from the medical, social, and ICF models of disability. In doing so, it offers real-world support for conceptual arguments advanced within capability scholarship (Bickenbach, 2014; Burchardt, 2004; Terzi, 2005b; Trani et al., 2011; Mitra, 2006, 2018) that the CA can encompass the core elements of other dominant disability models. While this does not constitute an entirely novel theoretical position, the study makes an important contribution by extending a still-scarce body of empirical work (e.g., Mutanga, 2015) by demonstrating how such theoretical integrations unfold in practice within a complex Global South context.

This study makes both a theoretical and empirical contribution by enriching the understanding of conversion factors through the integration of Scott’s (2013) three-pillar institutional framework – an analytical lens not yet adopted in Capability Approach–based disability studies. By drawing together the CA and institutional lens, the study extends the explanatory depth of conversion factors and clarifies how regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures shape capability formation in practice. This integration strengthens the ontological grounding of CA analyses and demonstrates empirically how institutional forces influence the opportunities and constraints experienced by persons with disabilities in Pakistan.

This study foregrounds the powerful and multidimensional role of agency in the lives of persons with disabilities, offering both theoretical and empirical contributions to disability and capability scholarship. By drawing on Katz’s (2001) typology of agency, Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, and wider social science literature, the study expands the conceptualisation of agency in the Capability Approach beyond individual choice to include collective and transformative forms of action. In doing so, it enriches capability-based analyses by illustrating how agency and structure operate recursively in shaping the aspirations and opportunities of PWDs – an area that remains underdeveloped in both disability research (Shakespeare and Watson, 2021; Watson, 2019) and in capability studies (Leßmann, 2022; Hvinden and Halvorsen, 2018). Empirically, the study demonstrates how organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) emerge as expressions of collective agency and function as enabling conversion factors within local capability processes. This provides rare empirical insight into how new social resources and structures form through collective action in resource-constrained contexts, thereby addressing long-standing calls for greater attention to collective dimensions within the Capability Approach (Deneulin, 2008; Evans, 2002; Garza-Vázquez, 2022). These contributions offer an enriched understanding of how agency–structure dynamics shape disability experiences in Pakistan and extend the explanatory reach of capability-based approaches in Global South settings.

This study offers a rare and valuable contribution to Capability Approach–based disability research by operationalising the CA simultaneously as a normative, explanatory, and conceptual framework. Normatively, the CA is used to evaluate what equitable inclusion, community contribution and a dignified life ought to entail for persons with disabilities in Pakistan. Explanatorily, it uncovers how institutional, cultural, and social mechanisms – expressed through conversion factors – enable or constrain the development of key capabilities. In doing so, the study strengthens an emerging line of scholarship that applies the CA to explain the underlying causes of capability deprivation and the dynamic interplay between agency and structure (Iliya and Ononiwu, 2021; Mutanga, 2015; Ton et al., 2021). Conceptually, the study deepens the operationalisation of CA constructs by extending empirical understanding of corrosive disadvantage and fertile functionings in a Global South context. It identifies the deprivation of equitable inclusion as a systemic corrosive disadvantage generating compounding capability losses across multiple life domains, and it empirically demonstrates the capability for community contribution as a fertile functioning that enables other valued capabilities. The analysis further proposes an interdependent model of capabilities, showing how aspirations for community contribution act as a foundational pathway toward equitable inclusion and, ultimately, a dignified life.

Conceptually, this study also extends existing Capability Approach–based disability research by empirically identifying context-specific conversion factors that shape the capability sets of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. In particular, it foregrounds religion and support networks as influential conversion factors – dimensions that remain underexplored in CA disability scholarship. While religion has not been widely examined as a conversion factor, its identification here reflects a context-sensitive insight that distinguishes this study from CA-based work conducted in more secular settings. Similarly, although support networks and self-help groups are recognised for their advocacy roles, their explicit conceptualisation as enabling resources and conversion factors remains limited. By bringing these factors into analytic focus, the study offers a context-sensitive conceptual refinement that enhances the CA's explanatory and normative reach in disability research.

This study contributes to an emerging theoretical direction in disability research by integrating Critical Realism with the Capability Approach – a combination that remains underutilised but increasingly recognised for its potential (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006; Shakespeare and Watson, 2021). This integration enables a nuanced analysis of how structural conditions operate as generative mechanisms shaping the aspirations and capabilities of persons with disabilities, while also capturing the role of individual and collective agency in responding to, resisting, or transforming these mechanisms. Although a small number of studies have begun to explore this integration (e.g., Iliya and Ononiwu, 2021; Ton et al., 2021), this research strengthens and extends this line of inquiry by applying it within a new socio-cultural context and grounding it in rich empirical data from Pakistan. The study further contributes a visual analytical model (Figure 10.1) that illustrates how aspirations are shaped, mediated, and translated into realised or deprived capabilities through the interaction of structure and agency.

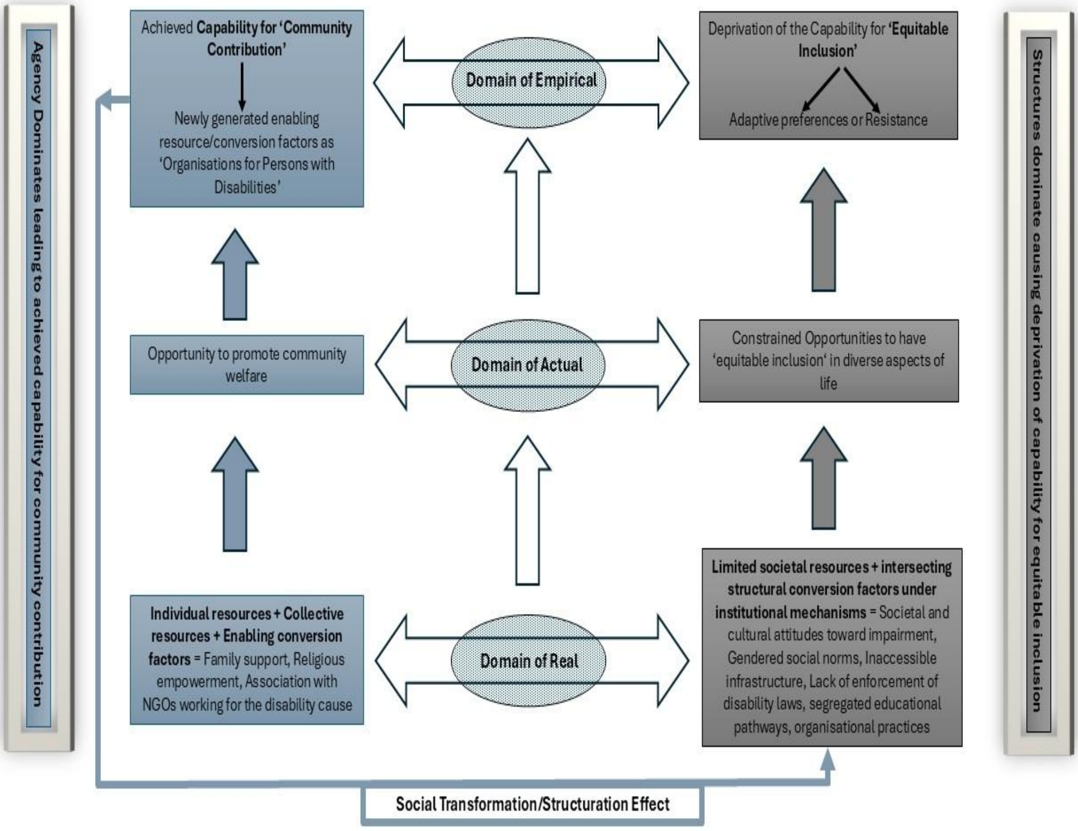

Figure 10.1: Critical realist perspective to understand the interplay of PWD's capabilities, conversion factors and agency in Pakistan

The model (Figure 10.1) integrates Bhaskar's (1975) three domains of reality – the empirical, actual, and real – with central concepts from the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) to illustrate how the aspirations and capabilities of persons with disabilities in Pakistan are shaped through the interaction of structure and agency.

Right-hand side: How structural conditions generate capability deprivation

The right side of the model (10.1) demonstrates how structural mechanisms operating within Bhaskar's domain of the real – including cultural attitudes toward disability, gender norms, inaccessible infrastructure, and weak institutional enforcement – produce constrained opportunities in the domain of the actual. These constraints manifest in the domain of the empirical as deprivation of the capability for equitable inclusion, with individuals responding through adaptive preferences or resistance. This side of the model shows how structure dominates, limiting PWDs' opportunities across multiple life domains.

Left-hand side: How agency generates capability expansion

In contrast, the left side of the model (10.1) highlights how PWDs exercise individual and collective agency in the face of these constraints. Drawing again on Bhaskar's domains, resources such as family support, religious empowerment, and connections with NGOs (domain of the real) create opportunities to promote community welfare (domain of the actual). These opportunities become observable in the domain of the empirical as the capability for community contribution. Crucially, when this capability is realised, it leads to the formation of new enabling structural resources, most notably Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). These OPDs strengthen collective capacity, shift cultural attitudes, and advocate for improved policies and practices, thereby generating more supportive structural conditions for PWDs.

Overall, the model demonstrates a structuration process (Giddens, 1984) in which structural forces constrain capabilities, while agency-driven actions transform those structures, illustrating the dynamic processes shaping disability experiences in Pakistan.

10.4 Policy and Practical Implications

The findings of this study hold important policy and practical implications for advancing the inclusion, well-being, and agency of PWDs in Pakistan. This study identifies the deprivation of equitable inclusion for PWDs in Pakistan not only as a marker of inequality in capabilities but also as a direct consequence of the lack of social resources available to them. The opportunities and freedoms to pursue valued goals are systematically restricted. This deprivation manifests in two ways: some PWDs adjust to the limited opportunities available, while others develop coping mechanisms to navigate these constraints. Yet, both responses ultimately reflect the injustices of society, as highlighted by Riddle (2022). Adjustment to an unjust system signals the absence of adequate structural support. Whereas those who manage to achieve despite these hurdles are often taken as ‘success stories’, reinforcing a detrimental narrative that the problem lies with those individuals who do not 'overcome', rather than blaming the unequal systems that constrain their agency. Success stories should inspire the system and other stakeholders not to absolve themselves of their responsibilities, but to learn from them. These success stories must be viewed as learning pathways to identify practices and channels that empower all PWDs, not just a resilient few.

The findings of this study make it clear that the pursuit of a dignified life for PWDs requires dismantling the intersecting structural mechanisms that perpetuate their marginalisation. It requires systemic change across all institutional pillars, not just legislative reforms. While the Pakistani government has taken commendable steps through constitutional provision and legal instruments (such as ratification of UNCRPD and approval of Disability Act, 2020), change will remain superficial unless accompanied by targeted efforts to shift social mindsets through sustained public campaigns and by restructuring institutional practices with supplementation of appropriate resources. Without addressing all the interconnected dimensions of exclusion, legislative reforms will continue to underdeliver. A focused approach that aligns resource allocation with changes across the full institutional setup is vital for ensuring that rights translate into real freedoms and opportunities for PWDs. To address the interconnected barriers, siloed approaches must be substituted with an integrated framework where education, employment, health, and accessibility are coordinated through a unified strategy.

The findings of this study underscore the critical role of support networks, family and religion as enabling factors that enhance the well-being and agency of PWDs in Pakistan. These emphasise the need to develop locally grounded policies that reflect these cultural realities. Inclusion models and policies drawn from Western contexts often overlook such niche, culturally specific dynamics and may not fully address the lived realities of PWDs in Pakistan. Therefore, disability policy in Pakistan must move beyond imported frameworks and instead cultivate a context-sensitive approach. This could involve providing financial support and training to caregivers and support networks, as well as including them in formal planning for PWDs. At the same time, engaging with religious institutions can help promote inclusive attitudes, offer faith-based counselling, and raise awareness at the social level. However, it is equally important to recognise that family and religion can also function as constraining forces, as highlighted in the discussion chapter. Policies must therefore attend to both the enabling and restrictive roles of these institutions, ensuring that culturally embedded strengths are mobilised while potential harms are mitigated.

PWDs' aspirations to contribute to community development, along with their collective agency expressed via the formation and activism of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, offer critical takeaways for policymakers in Pakistan. These findings directly challenge the policy discourse of top-down interventions and show that grassroots capacity-building and empowerment are crucial. These underscore the need to recognise PWDs not merely as beneficiaries of policy, but as active agents whose participation is integral to inclusive and sustainable development. Institutional support for OPDs should not be peripheral – it must be central to disability policy. OPDs appear to be the catalyst for institutional change and must be formally recognised, resourced, and integrated into decision-making structures at all levels. OPDs should be officially engaged as community outreach partners to lead awareness campaigns, deliver inclusion training, and shift mainstream disability discourse. By providing OPDs with targeted funding and formal accountability roles, provincial governments can significantly improve conditions in underserved and remote areas. Systemic change must begin with those who live the reality. OPDs are not optional stakeholders; they are the frontline warriors for inclusive systems. At the same time, recognising their critical role should not absolve the state of its primary responsibility to ensure rights, protections, and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Robeyns (2017) highlights that justice-enhancing strategies are not the exclusive responsibility of the state; they can also arise from individuals, communities, and grassroots initiatives. The findings of this study strongly support this view, showing that capability expansion for persons with disabilities in Pakistan depends not only on state policy but also on community mobilisation, advocacy networks, OPDs, and the everyday agentic actions of PWDs themselves. Policy approaches must therefore recognise the plurality of agents involved in creating enabling environments and encourage multi-level, community-linked strategies rather than relying solely on top-down reforms.

10.5 Limitations and Areas for Future Research

While this study offers important insights, it is not without limitations – many of which point to valuable directions for future research.

First, the research design did not allow for a disaggregated analysis of different types of disabilities. The findings, therefore, present a composite account of diverse experiences and should not be taken to imply that disability is a homogenous condition. Future research could address this by focusing on the aspirations of individuals with specific impairments, adopting an intra-categorical intersectional lens (Goldberg, 2016).

Second, the study did not include participants with cognitive disabilities. Since work was a central domain of focus, the sample was limited to individuals engaged in some form of employment. Given the near absence of employment opportunities for persons with cognitive disabilities in Pakistan, this group was intentionally excluded. Future studies should aim to explore their aspirations and lived experiences, particularly in relation to non-work domains of life.

Third, all participants identified as Muslim. This likely reflects the demographic majority in the study context, as well as the constraints of snowball sampling, which often reproduces the social networks of initial contacts. As such, the intersection of disability with religious minority status remains unexplored. Including the perspectives of PWDs from minority religious backgrounds could provide a deeper understanding of intersecting marginalisations.

Fourth, the findings show that 7 of the 32 participants had co-founded disability welfare organisations, but only one was a woman. This gender disparity underscores the need for intersectional research to examine how gender, alongside disability, shapes opportunities for leadership and collective agency within OPDs.

Finally, data collection was concentrated in provincial capital cities, which provided some regional diversity but excluded perspectives from remote or highly disadvantaged areas. Since employment opportunities and social resources vary significantly between urban and rural contexts, future research should compare aspirations across these settings to capture structural variations in opportunity and agency.

These limitations do not diminish the contributions of this study; rather, they highlight fertile avenues for further scholarship that can build on and extend its findings.

10.6 Final Reflections

At its core, this research calls for reimagining justice through the lived realities of persons with disabilities in Pakistan. It is a reminder that a flourishing life cannot be legislated into existence without dismantling the deeper structures of exclusion and inequality. It is also a tribute to the agency, resilience, and vision of those who dare to dream beyond constraint. As Sen reminds us, “***what moves us, reasonably enough, is not the realisation of justice, but the elimination of injustice***” (*Sen, 2009, p. ix)* and this belief has guided every page of this thesis.

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Appendices

Appendix-1: Chronological order of disability legislation in Pakistan

Year	Law/Policy	Key Provisions
1981	Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance	Established a 1% employment quota for PWDs in public and private sector jobs; introduced rehabilitation councils.
2002	National Policy for Persons with Disabilities	Focused on rehabilitation, vocational training, education, and employment opportunities for PWDs.
2006	Accessibility Code of Pakistan	Outlined accessibility standards for public buildings and facilities.
2008	Special Citizens Act	Introduced special national identity cards and concessional benefits for PWDs.
2011	Ratification of UNCRPD	Pakistan ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
2014	Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act	Provincial law post-18th Amendment ensuring rights, 2% job quota, and inclusion measures.
2015	Punjab Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Amendment Act	Increased job quota for PWDs from 1% to 3% in Punjab.
2017	National Education Policy (Inclusive Education)	Recognised inclusive education as a priority for PWDs.
2018	ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act	Rights-based law for persons with disabilities in Islamabad Capital Territory.
2020	Pakistan Disability Rights Act	Comprehensive national legislation mandating rights protection, inclusion, and dignity for PWDs; removed derogatory terminology.

Appendix-2: In-Depth Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

Interview Particulars	
Tool Questions Code	
Location	In-person/Remote
Name of Interviewer	
Date of Interview:	D | D | M | M | Y | Y | Y | Y
Time Discussion Began:	Hr | Hr | Min | Min
Time Discussion Ended:	Hr | Hr | Min | Min
Details of Respondent	
Respondent Code	PWD-IDI-?
Name of the Respondent	
Gender	
Age (Years)	
Contact Number of Respondent	
Qualification	
Employment	
Organisation/Institution	
Years of Experience	

Marital status	
Sector	
Type of Disability	None Behavioral (unsure if this is being covered in this tool) Sensory Impairment Hearing Impairment Visual Impairment Sensory Impairment Physical Disability Epilepsy Parkinsonism Respiratory disorder Spinal Cord/ Brain injuries Multiple Sclerosis Polio Any other----------------
Severity of Disability	Mild Moderate Profound
Type of Respondent **(Tick as many as applicable)**	Development Sector Activist White Collar Employee Blue Collar Employee/ Daily Wager Other _________

Questions and Probes

	Probes	Queries
Tell me about your qualification and professional background and work experience?	Work-life routine, degree, work history	Already capturing in 1.2
Would you like to tell me a bit about the aspects of your physical challenge (ability) in your views/ What do you consider your physical challenge to be?	History of physical challenge, treatment, current status	
Work Aspirations and Limitations		
How much being in employment is important for you? How motivated were you to get a job/career? Grow in career?	Do you consider your work valuable? Opinion about their work/Financial/emotional/egoistically importance	
Is there any kind of work you like to do but can't do due to lack of facilities/ support?		Moved here from 2.7.2
Facilitators and Barriers in seeking job		
During your academic journey, what support in terms of education and training did you receive to perform at your job?	Did you receive any vocational training prior to finding a job? / Skilled working/hearing and visual impairment equipment	
	Do you think you could find a better job if you were given education/ training for your work-life? Would you excel more in your career?	
What kind of problems did you face when searching for a job?	Were they specific to your physical challenge or was it easier due to that? what made it easier? (Quota system) Do you think the attainment of this job has been supported by any governmental policy?	
While you were searching for a job, did any institute/platform/mentor help /guide/ support you?	Also ask if any NGO is providing any support in this regard?	Moved from 2.11 Yellow line is very direct and leading. In any case it is partially covered in 2.5.2
Challenges at workplace		
What daily struggle in our circumstances you must undertake to continue this job?		The yellow highlighted part is a separate question and already covered later.

		Removing from here.
	With regards to External Infrastructure: Transportation etc) buses, road/ How supportive/ unsupportive external environment is for you to work or lead a normal life?	
	With regards to Internal Infrastructure within the organization: Bathroom facilities /assistive technologies/Sitting arrangement/infrastructure at workplace/)	
Does your organization offer flexible working? If yes, what is your experience with it?	Flexible hours/ Stretched weeks/remote working/ Do you think the organizational environment supported you to exert your full potential? What is your experience of workplace adjustment according to your needs?	
What factors at the workplace would you count as obstructers for the advancement of your potential?		Moved here from 2.12
What is your view on putting extra effort, costs, and resources to gain the same results or living standards as compared to those with no disabilities? /As compared to colleagues do you spend more efforts		
What needs to be changed within the HR department of your organization to make it more conducive for PWDs	HR (Recruitment drives, equal opportunity, Hiring/recruitment, retention) Assistive Technologies and Workplace accommodations (Physical in terms of ramps /Behavioral)	Moved here from 2.8.1 Changes suggested
Is your current job an ideal job/career for you? / Do you feel satisfied with your job/life situation at the moment? Did you ever feel that you had to lower your expectation after you entered the job market?	what is your ideal career and what professional life means to you? /If they were not disabled, they could be a better job?	Moved here from 2.2.1
What changes should any company make to increase the inclusion of PWDs in workplaces?		Moved here from 2.8.2 Changes suggested.
Behaviors at workplace		
How do your employers/ supervisors behave with you? Do you feel valued by them?	/Immediate Manager/Colleagues	Moved here from 2.9.2.

		Changes suggested.
How do your company colleagues perceive you (examples)?Do you feel valued by the company employees?		Changes suggested
Do you get any support from colleagues/managers/organization for your career progression?		
Advancements of potential (careers, the potential to progress, what they want from life, what they want from work)		
Do u think you have a good career path and chance of getting promoted? Have you had opportunities like other people?		
Opinions on opportunities for PWDs and required changes		Moved here from 2.7
In your opinion, what visible and invisible barriers to employment exist for PWDs in Pakistan?	Social/psychological barriers like rejection during the interviews due to disability/ Physical i.e organization does not have place for disabled people/	
In your opinion what changes, in terms of education/training, are required to make you/ PWDs better equipped for work life?		Moved from 2.10.2
In your opinion, what role can the government play in this?		Moved from 2.10.3
Socio-economic wider social setup		
In Pakistan what kind of resources and support this person has received or would like to receive to make it develop professionally) Probe: Resources to come to work, To develop themselves and Whole system how it is working		
What do you think about your rights? Do you think society supports you to get your basic rights and right of work?		Question needs better phrasing. What data are you trying to capture through this
Experiencing Discrimination		
Have you experienced any discrimination while searching for job, or while working?		Moved here from 2.8.3 as recommended to be taken to the end

		Also suggesting changes.

Appendix-3: Interview Tool with Disability Stakeholders

Interview Particulars	
Tool Questions Code	
Location	In-person/Remote
Name of Interviewer	
Date of Interview:	D | D | M | M | Y | Y | Y | Y
Time Discussion Began:	Hr | Hr | Min | Min
Time Discussion Ended:	Hr | Hr | Min | Min
Details of Respondent	
Respondent Code	Stakeholder-IDI-?
Name of the Respondent	
Gender	
Contact Number of Respondent	
Qualification	
Employment	
Organization/Institution	
Years of Experience	
Sector	

Type of Respondent **(Tick as many as applicable)**	Employer/HR Development Sector/NGO Media Person Educationist Human Rights Policymaker/Government official Activist Other _________

Interview Questions
What are your views about the situation of disability employment inclusion in Pakistan?
What are the potential reasons employers don't want to hire PWDs?
What social/cultural forces hinder disability employment inclusion in Pakistan?
It is said that PWDs require extra effort, costs, and resources to gain the same results or living standards as compared to those with no disabilities, what are your views on this? How can this situation be reversed?
PWDs complain that they are usually offered contractual nature of jobs instead of permanent ones. What are the reasons and suggestions for change?
PWDs often complain that they are judged on the same parameters as their non-PWD counterparts. What do you say about this? How should their performance be measured?
PWDs often face discrimination in terms of salary packages and the nature of jobs and often get trapped with low salaries and low-scale jobs due to their given circumstances and this leads to limited career progression. What are your views on this and how it can be improved?
Your views on developing a code of conduct by the Government for ensuring PWDs situation in workplaces regarding discrimination in salary, workload, and performance measurement?

What are your views on ‘sensitisation programs’ in Govt departments and making them a compulsion for the private sector too? Impact/benefits-possibilities of doing this?
What are your views about women with disabilities as they are more disadvantaged as compared to their men counterparts and their employment/education is also subject to social norms of different areas of Pakistan? What steps can be taken to change their situation? (Skills-building programs for remote area women with disabilities)
There are policies and institutions for the welfare of PWDs but most of the people in our country are unaware of the policies and information available for them for their PWDs education and jobs? Your views and how to improve it?
Mostly PWDs are of the view that the quality of education is not at par in special schools as compared to mainstream schools and this becomes an issue at the time of employment search. What do you say about this? PWDs are restricted to study some professions or degree levels? Your take on this? Your views on non-segregated education? (How schools can be made inclusive?
It is suggested that a disability awareness curriculum should be mandatory for everyone to create an inclusive and informed society. Possibilities and benefits of this?
What changes in infrastructure level (Wider infrastructure of roads, transport, building layouts, assistive devices for PWDs) are possible within the given economic circumstances of Pakistan? (To improve general and workplace accessibility)
What social/cultural forces can help in enabling disability inclusion in organizations in Pakistan?
In your opinion, what laws/policies can foster the inclusion process?
What is the role of quota system (for PWDs employment) in Pakistan? How it can be made effective in achieving maximum inclusion? How to eliminate corruption in the quota system if exists? What is the role of connections/references in getting employment on quota? How to ensure that private sector follows quota?
Often people with severe disabilities complain that they are rejected (on quota jobs or others) due to their severity of disability and those with lesser disabilities are preferred. What are your views about this and how it could be improved?
What other meaningful changes (in your opinion) can be done to increase disability inclusion in Pakistan?
Any suggestions/changes towards policy/implementation/compliance/collection of information?

Do PWDs have access to any information/networks to support their employment journey?
What is your opinion about the role of government in this regard?
What changes at grass root levels are possible to improve the employment situation of PWDs? (e.g. Linking NGOs, corporate and Govt sector).
How mindset towards PWDs employment can be improved in general in Pakistan (Govt and corporate sector)?
What incentives/benefits can be given to employers for hiring PWDs?
Anything you want to add?

Appendix-4: Demographic profile of Respondents (Persons with Disabilities)

Code	pseudonym	Sex	Age	Qualification	Type of Disability	Nature of Disability	Organisation Type / Sector	Nature of Job
R1	Aisha	F	34	Masters	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	MNC/ Corporate	Didn't disclose
R2	Ali	M	24	Bachelors	Visually Impaired	Mild (Visibility issue in daylight)	MNC/ Corporate	Assistant Project Lead
R3	Bilal	M	47	High School	Rickets/ Wheelchair -bound	Profound	DPO/ Developmental	Founder of Disabled Welfare Organisation
R4	Hassan	M	42	Masters	Hypotonia/ Wheelchair bound	Profound	DPO/ Developmental	Founder of Disabled Welfare Organisation
R5	Sana	F	36	Masters	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Didn't disclose
R6	Kiran	F	40	Masters (Foreign degree on scholarship)	Rickets / Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	CEO of Disabled Welfare Organisation
R7	Rabia	F	28	High School	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Counsellor in an NGO working for Women with Disabilities
R8	Usman	M	38	Bachelors	Visual Impairment	Profound	Health Sector	Daily wager
R9	Nadia	F	32	MBBS (Preparing for FCPS exams)	Orthotic / Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Govt/ Health Sector	Medical Officer (GP)
R10	Hina	F	30	10th Grade	Polio	Mild	Developmental	Trainer to facilitate women with disabilities
R11	Abid	M	29	Masters	Visually Impaired	Profound	Govt/ High Court	Office Coordinator (Clerical)
R12	Imran	M	38	Masters	Leg shortening/ Short-leg syndrome	Mild	Govt/ National Highway Authority	Consultant
R13	Salman	M	38	Masters	Blind	Profound	MNC/ Corporate	Receptionist
R14	Noman	M	51	Bachelors	Deaf	Profound	Private IT Company/ Corporate	IT professional

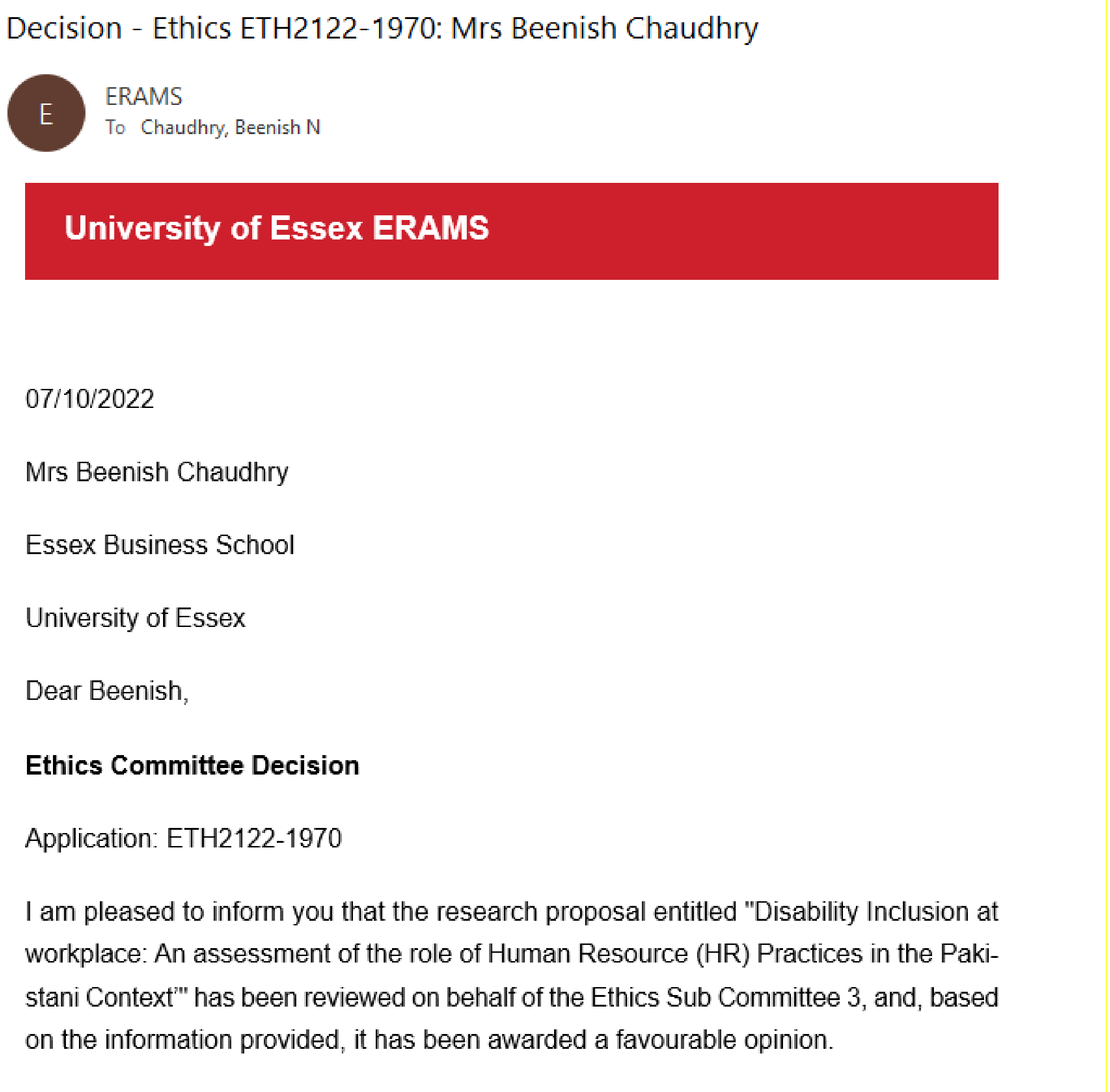
R15	Zara	F	34	Bachelors	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Project Officer
R16	Tahir	M	34	Masters	Polio	Mild	Govt/ Construction Department	Office Assistance
R17	Kamran	M	28	Bachelors	Hearing and Speech Impairment	Profound	Private Organisation/ Corporate	Data Entry Operator
R18	Mariam	F	29	Bachelors	Hearing and Speech Impairment	Profound	Banking sector	Data Entry Operator
R19	Amir	M	31	Bachelors	Hearing and Speech Impairment	Profound	Private Company/ Corporate	Graphic Designer
R20	Yasir	M	36	Bachelors	Hearing and Speech Impairment	Profound	NGO/ Developmental	Trainer
R21	Shahid	M	30	M Phil	Visually Impaired	Profound	Education	Senior specialist teacher in a special school
R22	Mehwish	F	40	M Phil	Visually Impaired	Profound	Education	Vice Principal /teacher in a special school
R23	Waqas	M	29	Bachelors	Hearing and Speech Impairment	Profound	Banking Sector	Office Assistant
R24	Nadeem	M	39	Masters	Visually Impaired	Profound	Developmental	Coordinator
R25	Saba	F	35	Masters	Visually Impaired	Profound	Government/ Social Welfare Department	Statistic Officer
R26	Junaid	M	55	Bachelors	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Project Manager/ Founder of Independent living centre
R27	Adnan	M	37	Masters	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Founder of a Disability Awareness Organization
R28	Nabeel	M	32	Masters	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Founder of Disabled Welfare Organization
R29	Fatima	F	41	LLB	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Law/ Developmental	Disability Activist
R30	Sidra	F	32	M Phil	Visually Impaired	Profound	Education	Lecturer

R31	Omar	M	47	Masters	Polio/ Wheelchair Bound	Profound	Developmental	Founder of a Disability Awareness Organization
R32	Saad	M	42	Masters	Congenital Amputee	Profound	Law/ Developmental	Disability right Activist

Appendix-5: Demographic profile of disability stakeholders

Sr	Disability Stakeholder	Gender	Field
1.	Stakeholder 1	Female	NGO Representative
2.	Stakeholder 2	Female	NGO Representative
3.	Stakeholder 3	Male	Government official
4.	Stakeholder 4	Male	NGO Representative
5.	Stakeholder 5	Male	NGO Representative
6.	Stakeholder 6	Male	NGO Representative
7.	Stakeholder 7	Male	Government Official
8.	Stakeholder 8	Male	NGO Representative
9.	Stakeholder 9	Male	Human Rights Lawyer
10.	Stakeholder 10	Male	HR Team Member
11.	Stakeholder 11	Female	HR Team Member
12.	Stakeholder 12	Male	HR Team Member
13.	Stakeholder 13	Female	Special Education Teacher

Appendix-6: Ethical Approval



Decision - Ethics ETH2122-1970: Mrs Beenish Chaudhry

ERAMS
To Chaudhry, Beenish N

University of Essex ERAMS

07/10/2022

Mrs Beenish Chaudhry

Essex Business School

University of Essex

Dear Beenish,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2122-1970

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Disability Inclusion at workplace: An assessment of the role of Human Resource (HR) Practices in the Pakistani Context'" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 3, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

Appendix-7: Participants consent form

Participant Consent form for Research Project: "Disability Inclusion at the workplace: An assessment of the role of Human Resource (HR) Practices in the Pakistani Context"

Dear participant,

This research is being carried out by Beenish Neik Chaudhry under the supervision of Dr Marina Mischalski and Dr Anita Hammer.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the researcher.
The answers which you provide will be recorded through audio recording for in-person, telephone or zoom interviews.

Please see the attached Participant Information Sheet for details about the study and your rights as a participant.

Yours,

Beenish Neik Chaudhry

Statement of Consent	**Please initial each box**
• I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet dated for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had any questions satisfactorily answered.	☐
• I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal will be destroyed/ cannot be withdrawn because it cannot be identified.	☐
• I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.	☐
• I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for PhD thesis, future academic research publications and presentations.	☐
• I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.	☐
• I give permission for the data to be stored in the form of de-identified (anonymised) transcripts, audio recordings. I give permission for the data that I provide to be deposited in [UK data archives repository or University of Essex research data repository] so that they will be available for future research and learning activities by other individuals.	☐
• I agree for this interview to be audio recorded by the researcher	☐
• I agree to participate in the research project, “Disability inclusion at the workplace: An assessment of the role of Human Resource (HR) practices in the Pakistani Context”, being carried out by Ms. Beenish Neik Chaudhry.	☐

Participant’s signature ____________________ Date ____________

Researcher’s signature ____________________ Date ____________

Appendix-8: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet for Research Project: “Disability Inclusion at the workplace: An assessment of the role of Human Resource (HR) Practices in the Pakistani Context”

Dear participant,

I, Beenish Neik Chaudhry, am currently carrying out a piece of research entitled, “Disability inclusion at the workplace: An assessment of the role of Human Resource (HR) practices in the Pakistani Context” under the supervision of Dr Marina Mischalski and Dr Anita Hammer.

We are investigating the role of Human Resource (HR) practices in fostering the inclusion of disabled people in the workplace within the Pakistani context and assessing the contextual barriers and enablers for disabled people’s employment in Pakistan. We intend to collect data through qualitative semi-structured interviews for this purpose. This research is being undertaken as part of the PhD degree program.

This information sheet provides you with information about the study and your rights as a participant.

What does taking part in the research involve?

If you decide to take part in this research, this will require you to participate in an interview session. The interview will last between 1 to 2 hours and will be audio recorded. You will have the option to choose the interview format either face to face, via zoom or by telephone.

Do I have to take part?

Naturally, there is no obligation to take part in the study. It’s entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to give consent to take part. If publications or reports have already been disseminated, these cannot be withdrawn, however, these will only contain anonymised or aggregated data. If you decide to participate in the study and then change your mind in the future, you can withdraw at any point, even after the data has been collected. If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time, please contact the researcher on the details below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept securely in encrypted files in my password-protected laptop and will only be accessible by me. However, this research forms part of my PhD studies at the University of Essex and therefore may be subject to scrutiny by other University staff in determining the outcome of my degree. If you are mentioned individually in any publications or reports, then a participant number or pseudonym will be used instead of a real name and identifying details will be removed. A list may be kept linking participant numbers or pseudonyms to names, but this will be kept securely and will only be accessible by those listed above. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, upon request. Please keep in mind that University’s Research Data Management Policy requires that research data are made available for access and re-use where legally, ethically and commercially appropriate. However, it will be used anonymously for such purposes. Furthermore, as per the requirements and guidelines of the university, I will retain the data with me securely for a minimum period of 10 years after the completion of this research project.

Are there any possible disadvantages or risk of taking part?

There is no potential risk or disadvantages involved in taking part in this research. Although you will be investing your precious 1-2 hours in this research. However, some of the questions may be stressful or upsetting. If you feel stressed or uncomfortable, you can contact a trained clinical psychologist for a free consultation at either of the following helplines:

- Call 0331-8444056, Counselling services are provided by the Centre of Clinical Psychology, University of the Punjab, Lahore Pakistan which operates from 9:30 am to 3:30 pm from Monday to Saturday.
- Call 0311-7786264, a 24/7 days a week helpline by the name of “Umang Pakistan Mental Health Helpline”.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your input is highly beneficial for this research work. It will help us understand the issues faced by disabled people for gaining employment in Pakistan and what counts as enablers or barriers in the Pakistani context. Your kind cooperation will help us get insights into the matter.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?
The legal basis for processing the data collected from this project is informed consent. The Data Controller for his project is the University of Essex and the contact is the University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?
If you wish to take part in this research, then you will have to sign the participant’s consent form and you can contact the undersigned through email for this purpose.

Who is funding the research?

This study is funded by Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (CSC), UK.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The information taken from you during the interview will be used in my PhD thesis and I might use the information for research articles, conference presentations or academic publications.

I will reproduce your views/quotes taken during the interview for writing my findings and analysis of the research study. However, it will be used as anonymised/pseudonyms and your identity will never be revealed. You can also contact me for a copy of the findings of this study.

Who has reviewed the study?

I have applied for ethical approval to undertake this study. My application was reviewed and approved by the Social Sciences Ethics Sub-Committee at the University of Essex.

What happens if something goes wrong?

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been treated during the course of this study then you should immediately inform the student and/or their supervisor (details below). If you are not satisfied with the response, you may contact the Essex Business School Research Ethics Officer, Dr Casper Hoedemaekers (choedem@essex.ac.uk) or Sarah Manning-Press (sarahm@essex.ac.uk) who will advise you further.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

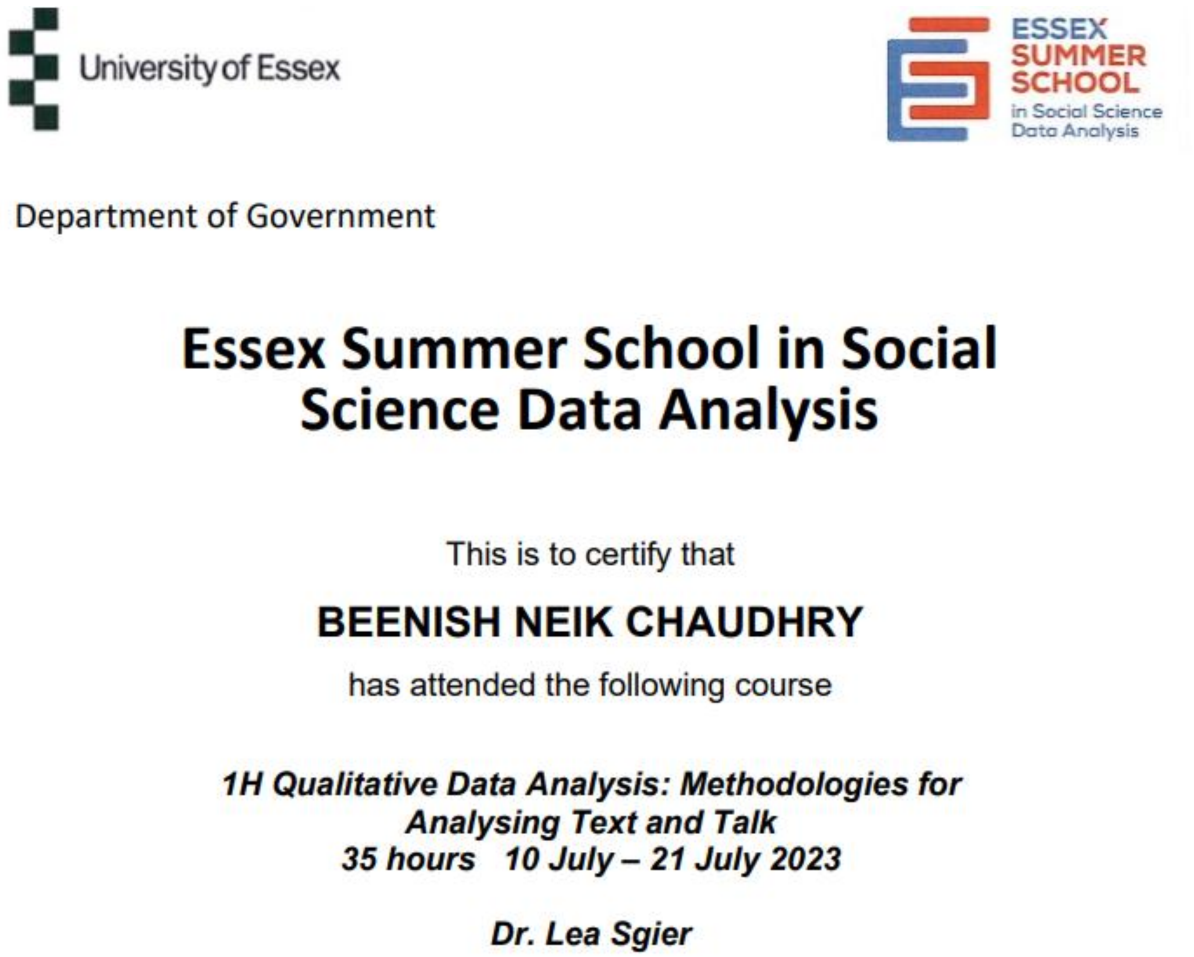
We would be very grateful for your participation in this study. If you need to contact us in future, please contact me at bnchau@essex.ac.uk or my supervisors Dr Marina Mischalski (mmichal@essex.ac.uk) and Dr Anita Hammer (anita.hammer@essex.ac.uk). You can also contact us in writing at: EBS, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ.

You are welcome to ask questions at any point.

Yours Sincerely,

Beenish Neik Chaudhry
PhD Scholar
Essex Business School

Appendix-9 Qualitative Data Analysis Course Certificate



University of Essex

ESSEX SUMMER SCHOOL in Social Science Data Analysis

Department of Government

Essex Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis

This is to certify that

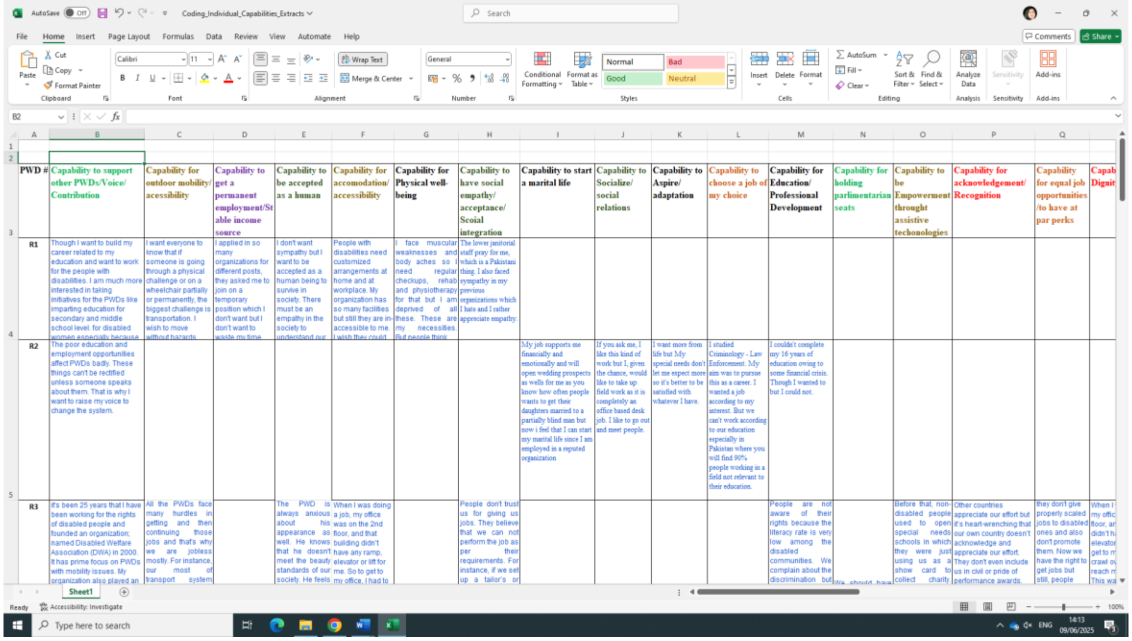
BEENISH NEIK CHAUDHRY

has attended the following course

1H Qualitative Data Analysis: Methodologies for Analysing Text and Talk
35 hours   10 July – 21 July 2023

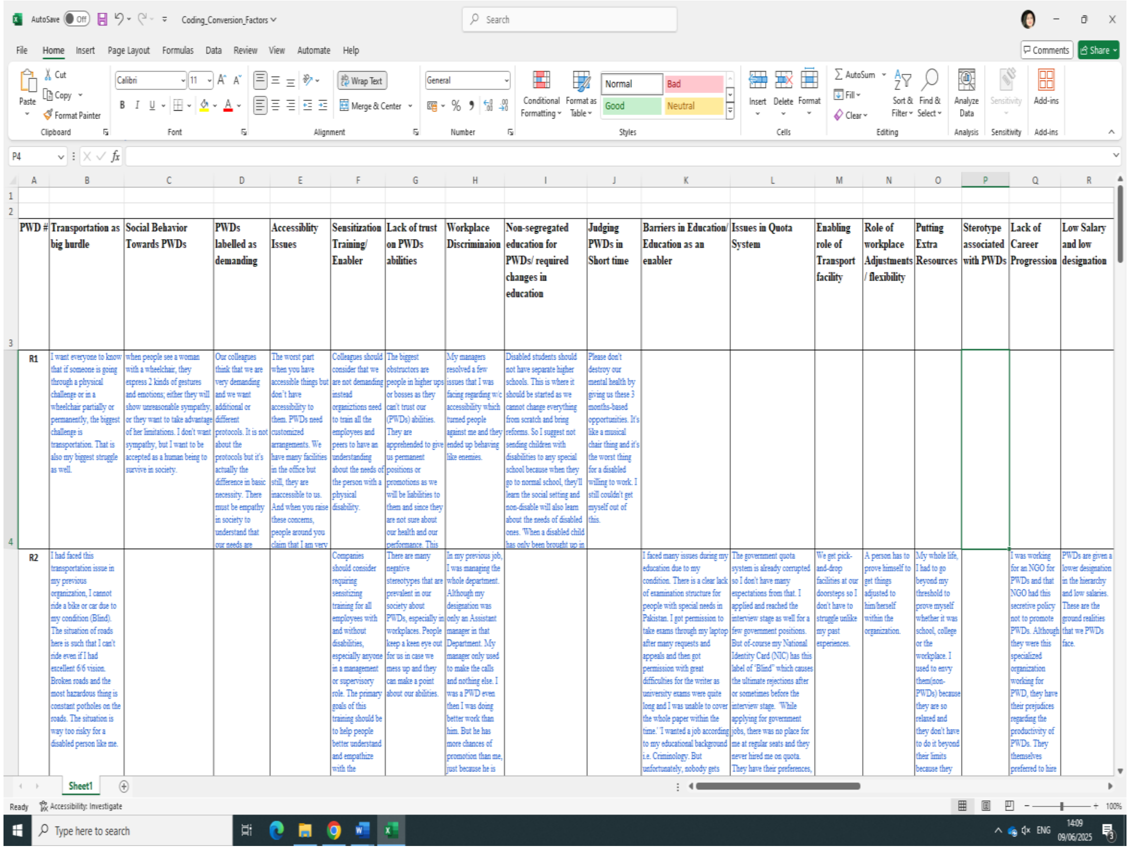
Dr. Lea Sgier

Appendix-10: Coding process related to Aspirations



PWD #	Capability to support other PWDs/Voice/ Contribution	Capability for outdoor mobility/ acessibility	Capability to get a permanent employment/Stable income source	Capability to be accepted as a human	Capability for accomodation/ accessibility	Capability for Physical well-being	Capability to have social empathy/ acceptance/ Scoial integration	Capability to start a marital life	Capability to Socialize/ social relations	Capability to Aspire/ adaptation	Capability to choose a job of my choice	Capability for Education/ Professional Development	Capability for holding parlimentarian seats	Capability to be Empowerment throught assistive techonologies	Capability for acknowledgement/ Recognition	Capability for equal job opportunities /to have at par perks	Capab Dignit
R1	Though I want to build my career related to my education and want to work for the people with disabilities. I am much more interested in taking initiatives for the PWDs like imparting education for secondary and middle school level. for disabled women especially because	I want everyone to know that if someone is going through a physical challenge or on a wheelchair partially or permanently, the biggest challenge is transportation. I wish to move without hazards	I applied in so many organizations for different posts, they asked me to join on a temporary position which I don't want but I don't want to waste my time	I don't want sympathy but I want to be accepted as a human being to survive in society. There must be an empathy in the society to understand our	People with disabilities need customized arrangements at home and at workplace. My organization has so many facilities but still they are in-accessible to me. I wish they could	I face muscular weaknesses and body aches so I need regular checkups, rehab and physiotherapy for that but I am deprived of all these. These are my necessities. But people think	The lower janitorial staff pray for me, which is a Pakistani thing. I also faced sympathy in my previous organizations which I hate and I rather appreciate empathy.										
R2	The poor education and employment opportunities affect PWDs badly. These things can't be rectified unless someone speaks about them. That is why I want to raise my voice to change the system.							My job supports me financially and emotionally and will open wedding prospects as wells for me as you know how often people wants to get their daughters married to a partially blind man but now i feel that I can start my marital life since I am employed in a reputed organization	If you ask me, I like this kind of work but I, given the chance, would like to take up field work as it is completely an office based desk job. I like to go out and meet people.	I want more from life but My special needs don't let me expect more so it's better to be satisfied with whatever I have.	I studied Criminology - Law Enforcement. My aim was to pursue this as a career. I wanted a job according to my interest. But we can't work according to our education especially in Pakistan where you will find 90% people working in a field not relevant to their education.	I couldn't complete my 16 years of education owing to some financial crisis. Though I wanted to but I could not.					
R3	It's been 25 years that I have been working for the rights of disabled people and founded an organization; named Disabled Welfare Association (DWA) in 2000. It has prime focus on PWDs with mobility issues. My organization also played an	All the PWDs face many hurdles in getting and then continuing those jobs and that's why we are jobless mostly. For instance, our most of transport system		The PWD is always anxious about his appearance as well. He knows that he doesn't meet the beauty standards of our society. He feels	When I was doing a job, my office was on the 2nd floor, and that building didn't have any ramp, elevator or lift for me. So to get to my office, I had to		People don't trust us for giving us jobs. They believe that we can not perform the job as per their requirements. For instance, if we set up a tailor's or					People are not aware of their rights because the literacy rate is very low among the disabled communities. We complain about the discrimination but	We should have	Before that, non-disabled people used to open special needs schools in which they were just using us as a show card to collect charity.	Other countries appreciate our effort but it's heart-wrenching that our own country doesn't acknowledge and appreciate our effort. They don't even include us in civil or pride of performance awards.	they don't give properly scaled jobs to disabled ones and also don't promote them. Now we have the right to get jobs but still, people	When I my offic floor, ar didn't ha elevator get to m crawl o reach m This wa

Appendix-11: Coding process related to conversion factors



PWD #	Transportation as big hurdle	Social Behavior Towards PWDs	PWDs labelled as demanding	Accessiblity Issues	Sensitization Training/ Enabler	Lack of trust on PWDs abilities	Workplace Discriminaion	Non-segregated education for PWDs/ required changes in education	Judging PWDs in Short time	Barriers in Education/ Education as an enabler	Issues in Quota System	Enabling role of Transport facility	Role of workplace Adjustments / flexibility	Putting Extra Resources	Sterotype associated with PWDs	Lack of Career Progression	Low Salary and low designation
R1	I want everyone to know that if someone is going through a physical challenge or in a wheelchair partially or permanently, the biggest challenge is transportation. That is also my biggest struggle as well.	when people see a woman with a wheelchair, they express 2 kinds of gestures and emotions; either they will show unreasonable sympathy, or they want to take advantage of her limitations. I don't want sympathy, but I want to be accepted as a human being to survive in society.	Our colleagues think that we are very demanding and we want additional or different protocols. It is not about the protocols but it's actually the difference in basic necessity. There must be empathy in society to understand that our needs are	The worst part when you have accessible things but don't have accessibility to them. PWDs need customized arrangements. We have many facilities in the office but still, they are inaccessible to us. And when you raise these concerns, people around you claim that I am very	Colleagues should consider that we are not demanding instead organiztions need to train all the employees and peers to have an understanding about the needs of the person with a physical disability.	The biggest obstructors are people in higher ups or bosses as they can't trust our (PWDs) abilities. They are apprehended to give us permanent positions or promotions as we will be liabilities to them and since they are not sure about our health and our performance. This	My managers resolved a few issues that I was facing regarding w/c accessibility which turned people against me and they ended up behaving like enemies.	Disabled students should not have separate higher schools. This is where it should be started as we cannot change everything from scratch and bring reforms. So I suggest not sending children with disabilities to any special school because when they go to normal school, they'll learn the social setting and non-disable will also learn about the needs of disabled ones. 'When a disabled child has only been brought up in	Please don't destroy our mental health by giving us these 3 months-based opportunities. It's like a musical chair thing and it's the worst thing for a disabled willing to work. I still couldn't get myself out of this.								
R2	I had faced this transportation issue in my previous organization, I cannot ride a bike or car due to my condition (Blind). The situation of roads here is such that I can't ride even if I had excellent 6/6 vision. Broken roads and the most hazardous thing is constant potholes on the roads. The situation is way too risky for a disabled person like me.				Companies should consider requiring sensitizing training for all employees with and without disabilities, especially anyone in a management or supervisory role. The primary goals of this training should be to help people better understand and empathize with the	There are many negative stereotypes that are prevalent in our society about PWDs, especially in workplaces. People keep a keen eye out for us in case we mess up and they can make a point about our abilities.	In my previous job, I was managing the whole department. Although my designation was only an Assistant manager in that Department. My manager only used to make the calls and nothing else. I was a PWD even then I was doing better work than him. But he has more chances of promotion than me, just because he is			I faced many issues during my education due to my condition. There is a clear lack of examination structure for people with special needs in Pakistan. I got permission to take exams through my laptop after many requests and appeals and then got permission with great difficulties for the writer as university exams were quite long and I was unable to cover the whole paper within the time.' 'I wanted a job according to my educational background i.e. Criminology. But unfortunately, nobody gets	The government quota system is already corrupted so I don't have many expectations from that. I applied and reached the interview stage as well for a few government positions. But of-course my National Identity Card (NIC) has this label of 'Blind" which causes the ultimate rejections after or sometimes before the interview stage. 'While applying for government jobs, there was no place for me at regular seats and they never hired me on quota. They have their preferences,	We get pick-and-drop facilities at our doorsteps so I don't have to struggle unlike my past experiences.	A person has to prove himself to get things adjusted to him/herself within the organization.	My whole life, I had to go beyond my threshold to prove myself whether it was school, college or the workplace. I used to envy them(non-PWDs) because they are so relaxed and they don't have to do it beyond their limits because they		I was working for an NGO for PWDs and that NGO had this secretive policy not to promote PWDs. Although they were this specialized organization working for PWD, they have their prejudices regarding the productivity of PWDs. They themselves preferred to hire	PWDs are given a lower designation in the hierarchy and low salaries. These are the ground realities that we PWDs face.