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BEYOND MOTIVATION: PERCEIVED MOTIVATORS AND MULTI-LEVEL BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT AMONG WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN SAUDI ARABIA

Sohil Aqazlan^{1*}, Barah Alallawi² and Bashaer Algazlan³

¹Special Education Department, College of Education, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Email: sialqazlan@imamu.edu.sa

²Special Education Department, College of Educational Sciences, Mutah University, AlKarak, Jordan.

³Ministry of Education, Alqassim, Saudi Arabia.

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Corresponding Author: Sohil Aqazlan

(sialqazlan@imamu.edu.sa)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceived motivators and multi-level barriers toward education and employment among women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Despite national efforts toward social inclusion under Vision 2030, women with disabilities continue to encounter significant structural, societal, and institutional challenges that limit their educational and occupational opportunities. A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was employed. Data were collected from 148 women with visual, hearing, or physical disabilities across three major regions (Makkah, Eastern Region, and Riyadh) using a purpose-developed 22-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The instrument assessed five key domains: motivators (economic, social, and psychological), societal barriers, institutional barriers, individual barriers, and laws and institutional support. Results showed high levels of motivators ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.45$), with psychological motivators receiving the strongest endorsement ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.38$). In contrast, participants reported notable societal ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.78$) and institutional barriers ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.71$). A clear implementation gap was evident in the Laws and Support domain, where the legal framework was rated higher ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.72$) than actual institutional implementation ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.84$). The Individual Barriers domain recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.15$), with high variability indicating diverse personal experiences. Significant differences were observed by disability type. Women with visual impairment reported the highest post-secondary education attainment (74.7%), while women with physical disabilities showed the highest rate of previous work experience (90.9%). Women with hearing impairment consistently had the lowest outcomes across all indicators. These findings suggest that although Saudi women with disabilities possess strong internal motivation, persistent structural barriers continue to hinder their progress. The study underscores the urgent need to move beyond general inclusion policies toward targeted, disability-specific interventions and more effective enforcement of existing laws and support systems.

KEYWORDS: Women With Disabilities, Motivators, Barriers, Education, Employment, Saudi Arabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empowering persons with disabilities has become a global priority within contemporary development agendas, particularly in relation to achieving gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable economic growth. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly emphasizes the importance of addressing the rights and needs of marginalized populations, including persons with disabilities, in order to reduce inequalities and eradicate poverty (United Nations, 2015). Despite these global commitments, persons with disabilities remain among the most disadvantaged groups worldwide, experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion across education, employment, and social participation (Pinilla-Roncancio *et al.*, 2020; Karr *et al.*, 2022). Recent estimates indicate that approximately 1.3 billion people live with disabilities globally, with women disproportionately affected by structural inequalities that limit their access to opportunities and resources (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Disability is increasingly understood as a gendered and socially constructed experience shaped by structural, cultural, and institutional factors rather than merely a medical condition (Campbell *et al.*, 2022). Persons with disabilities often encounter compounded disadvantages due to the intersection of gender and disability, resulting in restricted access to education, limited employment prospects, and heightened vulnerability to poverty (Shifrer & Frederick, 2019; Pettinicchio *et al.*, 2022). This intersectional disadvantage reinforces cycles of marginalization, where exclusion from education reduces employability, and limited employment opportunities further exacerbate economic dependency and social exclusion (Karr *et al.*, 2022).

In Saudi Arabia, the unemployment rate among persons with disabilities is notably high. Specifically, the unemployment rate for women with disabilities reaches 75.3%, compared to 32.8% for women without disabilities. This reflects a significant double disadvantage arising from the intersection of gender norms and disability stigma, which perpetuates cycles of economic dependence and social exclusion (Abed *et al.*, 2024; ESCWA, 2023).

Education plays a pivotal role in breaking these cycles of disadvantage. It provides persons with disabilities with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to achieve independence and participate meaningfully in society (UNESCO, 2020; Tefera *et al.*, 2018). Educational attainment has been consistently linked to improved employment

outcomes, reduced inequality, and enhanced social inclusion (Lindstrom *et al.*, 2020). However, access to education remains uneven, as individuals with disabilities face significant barriers to enrollment and completion due to stigma, lack of accessible infrastructure, and insufficient support systems (UNESCO, 2020). These barriers are particularly pronounced in contexts where disability is perceived negatively, limiting investment in education and reinforcing disparities (Tefera *et al.*, 2018).

The relationship between education and employment is deeply interconnected. Education equips persons with disabilities with the competencies required to access the labor market, while employment provides financial independence, social integration, and improved self-esteem (Lindsay *et al.*, 2018; Seino, 2024). Nevertheless, persons with disabilities continue to face substantial barriers in the labor market, including discrimination, inaccessible workplaces, and limited access to vocational training (Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen, 2021; Morwane *et al.*, 2021). As a result, many are confined to informal or low-paying jobs that offer minimal security and limited opportunities for advancement (Arstein-Kerslake, 2019; Chowdhury *et al.*, 2022).

At the same time, individuals with disabilities may be motivated by powerful **economic motivators** (such as achieving financial independence and securing better job opportunities), **social motivators** (such as changing negative societal perceptions, increasing participation in society, and building professional and social relationships), and **psychological motivators** (such as enhanced self-confidence, pride, and satisfaction from academic or professional accomplishments). Understanding these motivators alongside the barriers is essential for developing effective empowerment strategies.

A critical factor contributing to this exclusion is the lack of effective education and training opportunities tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities. Vocational training, self-advocacy skills, and assistive technologies have been identified as key mechanisms for enhancing employability and facilitating inclusion in the workforce (Almalky, 2020; Anthonysamy *et al.*, 2020). Assistive technologies, in particular, play a transformative role by enabling individuals with disabilities to access educational materials, develop skills, and participate in workplace activities (Atanga *et al.*, 2020; Gowran *et al.*, 2022). Despite these advancements, the effectiveness of training

programs and interventions remains underexplored, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and context-specific approaches (Stern et al., 2020).

Beyond individual-level barriers, organizational and institutional factors significantly influence the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education and employment. Research in human resource management (HRM) highlights persistent inequalities in recruitment, career progression, and workplace support (Haar et al., 2022; Schloemer-Jarvis et al., 2022). Although individuals with disabilities are often recognized for their loyalty and reliability, they continue to face discrimination, wage gaps, and limited access to leadership roles (Friedman & Owen, 2017). Furthermore, stigma and fear of discrimination may discourage disclosure of disabilities, thereby restricting access to necessary accommodations and support (Lindsay et al., 2018).

Despite national initiatives such as the **Mowaamah (Mawaima)** certification program, which encourages organizations to adopt inclusive employment practices, and the **Qaderoon** network, which aims to raise awareness and facilitate the integration of persons with disabilities into the labor market, implementation gaps persist. These programs represent important steps toward inclusion; however, barriers such as insufficient workplace accommodations, limited vocational rehabilitation programs, and inadequate support from academic and employment institutions continue to hinder full participation (Abed et al., 2024; AlTaleb et al., 2024).

These challenges are further intensified in socio-cultural contexts where gender norms and disability stigma intersect. In many societies, including the Middle East, traditional cultural values influence perceptions of disability and gender roles, often limiting opportunities for persons with disabilities in education and employment (Hamdan, 2005; Alquaraini, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, for example, despite significant progress in disability rights and empowerment under Vision 2030, barriers such as social stigma, limited institutional support, and gaps in policy implementation continue to hinder full inclusion (Alzahrani, 2023; Aldosari et al., 2025).

An integrated examination of both motivators and multi-level barriers—including societal attitudes, institutional shortcomings, individual challenges, and the role of laws and support systems—remains limited in the Saudi context. This study is conceptually informed by the social model of disability, which emphasizes the role of societal and structural barriers in shaping disability experiences, as well as intersectionality theory,

which highlights the compounded disadvantages faced by individuals at the intersection of gender and disability. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps. To this end, the present study was guided by the following research question: *What are the perceived levels of motivators (economic, social, and psychological) and multi-level barriers (societal, institutional, individual, and laws and institutional support) toward education and employment among women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia?*

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Design and Setting

A cross-sectional quantitative survey design was adopted to examine the motivators and multi-level barriers toward education and employment among women with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected through a purpose-built structured questionnaire distributed across multiple regions of the Kingdom, including Makkah, the Eastern Region, and Riyadh. Ethical approval was obtained from Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University and Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University via the Sarah Al-Sudairy Centre for Women Studies (ethical approval number: 638891466931093446).

Data collection took place between March and July 2025. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. All participants reviewed an online information sheet and provided electronic informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling through disability support organizations, rehabilitation centres, and disability-focused social media platforms in Saudi Arabia. Eligibility criteria included: (1) being female, (2) being 18 years of age or older, (3) having a confirmed diagnosis of visual impairment, hearing impairment, or physical disability, (4) residing in one of the three major regions of Saudi Arabia (Riyadh, Makkah, or the Eastern Region), where educational institutions and employment opportunities are relatively more available, and (5) being able to provide informed consent. Individuals under 18 years, those with cognitive impairments that prevented survey completion, and non-residents were excluded. A total of 148 women with disabilities were included in the final analysis. The sample was divided into two age groups: 18–25 years ($n = 50$) and 26–35 years ($n = 98$), to focus on women in the transitional phase from secondary education to early adulthood and early career development. Detailed demographic and background characteristics are

presented in Table 1.

2.3. Data Collection Instrument

A purpose-built structured questionnaire was developed based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks on disability, education, and employment. The instrument consisted of 22 items organized into five domains. Domain 1 (Motivators) included six items across three subdomains: Economic Motivators (2 items), Social Motivators (2 items), and Psychological Motivators (2 items). Domain 2 (Societal Barriers) comprised three items. Domain 3 (Institutional Barriers) included six items divided into two subdomains: Education (3 items) and Employment (3 items). Domain 4 (Individual Barriers) consisted of three items. Domain 5 (Laws and Institutional Support) contained four items across two subdomains: Legal Framework (2 items) and Institutional Implementation (2 items).

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Participants also provided demographic information including age group, employment history (ever had a job), current employment status, post-secondary education, type of disability, and region of residence.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using both online and paper-based survey formats. The online questionnaire was disseminated through disability-related social media platforms, while printed versions were distributed via disability support organizations and rehabilitation centres.

Prior to participation, individuals were provided with detailed information about the study and were required to give informed consent. The questionnaire was administered in Arabic to ensure clarity and accessibility for all participants. All procedures were carried out in accordance with ethical standards for research involving individuals with disabilities.

2.5. Reliability And Validity

Content validity was established through expert review. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each domain separately, as the domains represent conceptually distinct constructs. Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 were considered acceptable. All domains demonstrated acceptable to good reliability: Domain 1 (Motivators, $\alpha = 0.867$), Domain 2 (Societal Barriers, $\alpha = 0.818$), Domain 3 (Institutional Barriers, $\alpha = 0.828$), Domain 4 (Individual Barriers, $\alpha = 0.864$), and Domain 5

(Laws and Institutional Support, $\alpha = 0.735$). Lower reliability values were observed in subdomains containing only two items, which is expected due to the limited number of items and does not necessarily indicate poor construct validity. Reliability was interpreted using established benchmarks (George & Mallery, 2005). The instrument was developed based on established theoretical frameworks and existing literature, and was reviewed by subject-matter experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and content validity of the items.

2.6. Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using R statistical software (version 4.3.2). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, medians, and interquartile ranges, were calculated for each domain and subdomain score. Domain scores were computed as the mean of their respective Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

In addition to mean scores, the percentage of positive responses (i.e., "agree" and "strongly agree") was calculated for key survey items and domains and presented graphically. Chi-square tests of independence were used to examine associations between disability type and key categorical variables, including post-secondary education, employment history (ever had a job), and current employment status. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$. No missing data were present, as all survey items were mandatory. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, advanced inferential analyses such as regression modelling were not conducted and are recommended for future research.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Participant Characteristics

The sample of 148 women with disabilities represented diverse age groups, employment status, educational attainment, and disability types. Participants were divided into two age groups, with a larger proportion in the 26–35 group ($n = 98, 66.2\%$) compared to those aged 18–25 ($n = 50, 33.8\%$).

More than half of the participants reported having previous work experience ($n = 84, 56.8\%$), while current employment status was relatively balanced between employed ($n = 73, 49.3\%$) and unemployed individuals ($n = 75, 50.7\%$). The majority had attained post-secondary education (diploma or higher) ($n = 94, 63.5\%$), compared to those without post-secondary education ($n = 54, 36.5\%$).

Visual impairment was the most prevalent

disability among participants ($n = 91$, 61.5%), followed by physical disability ($n = 33$, 22.3%) and hearing impairment ($n = 24$, 16.2%). Participants were drawn from three major regions of Saudi Arabia, with the highest representation from

Makkah ($n = 60$, 40.5%), followed by the Eastern Region ($n = 49$, 33.1%), and the lowest representation from Riyadh ($n = 39$, 26.4%), as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Background Characteristics (N = 148).

Variable	n (%)
Age Group	
18–25	50 (33.8%)
26–35	98 (66.2%)
Ever Had a Job	
No	64 (43.2%)
Yes	84 (56.8%)
Currently Employed	
No	75 (50.7%)
Yes	73 (49.3%)
Post-secondary Education (Diploma or Higher)	
No	54 (36.5%)
Yes	94 (63.5%)
Disability Diagnosis	
Hearing Impairment	24 (16.2%)
Physical Disability	33 (22.3%)
Visual impairment	91 (61.5%)
Region	
Eastern	49 (33.1%)
Makkah	60 (40.5%)
Riyadh	39 (26.4%)

3.2. Employment And Education Outcomes by Disability Type

As illustrated in Figure 1, clear differences emerged across disability groups. Women with visual impairment reported the highest rate of post-secondary education (74.7%), followed by those with physical disabilities (60.6%), while women with hearing impairment had the lowest rate (25.0%).

In terms of previous work experience, women with physical disabilities reported the highest proportion of having ever had a job (90.9%), compared to 47.3% among women with visual impairment and 45.8% among those with hearing

impairment. A similar pattern was observed for current employment, where women with physical disabilities had the highest employment rate (57.6%), followed by women with visual impairment (50.5%), while women with hearing impairment reported the lowest rate (33.3%).

Table 2 provides the corresponding counts and percentages, together with the results of Chi-square tests of independence. Statistically significant associations were found between disability type and both post-secondary education ($\chi^2 = 20.42$, $p < 0.001$) and having ever had a job ($\chi^2 = 20.20$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, no significant association was observed for current employment status ($\chi^2 = 3.41$, $p = 0.182$).

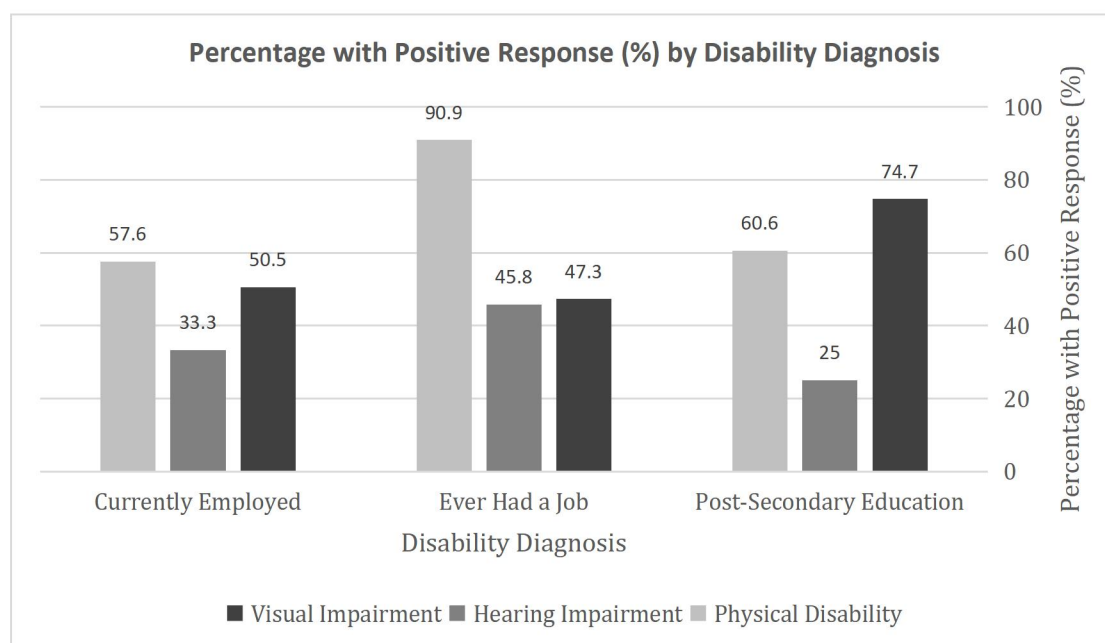


Figure 1: Percentage of Positive Responses Across Education and Employment Indicators by Disability Type Among Women with Disabilities in Saudi Arabia.

Table 2: Education And Employment Outcomes by Disability Type (N = 148).

Disability Type	Post-Secondary Education n (%)	Ever Had a Job n (%)	Currently Employed n (%)
Visual Impairment (n = 91)	68 (74.7)	43 (47.3)	46 (50.5)
Hearing Impairment (n = 24)	6 (25.0)	11 (45.8)	8 (33.3)
Physical Disability (n = 33)	20 (60.6)	30 (90.9)	19 (57.6)
χ^2 (df = 2)	20.42	20.2	3.41
p-value	< 0.001	< 0.001	0.182

Note: N = Number of Participants Who Responded "Yes". P < 0.001.

3.3. Descriptive Statistics for the Main Domains and Subdomains

Table 3 summarises the descriptive statistics for the five main domains and their subdomains. Participants reported high levels of motivators toward education and employment, with the Motivators domain recording the highest mean score ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.45$). Within this domain, the Psychological Motivators subdomain showed the strongest agreement ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.38$), followed by Social Motivators ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 0.57$) and Economic Motivators ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.69$).

Perceived barriers were also prominent. Both Institutional Barriers ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.71$) and Societal Barriers ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.78$) yielded

relatively high mean scores. Within the Institutional Barriers domain, employment-related barriers ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.67$) were slightly more pronounced than education-related barriers ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.82$).

The Laws and Support domain obtained a mean score of 4.11 ($SD = 0.67$). Notably, participants rated the Legal Framework higher ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.72$) than Institutional Implementation ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.84$), highlighting a perceived gap between the existence of national laws and policies and their actual implementation.

In contrast, the Individual Barriers domain recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.15$). The relatively high standard deviation in this domain indicates greater variability in participants' responses compared to the other domains.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the Included Domains and Subdomains (N = 148).

Domain	Mean	SD
Domain 1: Motivators	4.65	0.45
Economic	4.53	0.69
Social	4.66	0.57
Psychological	4.75	0.38
Domain 2: Societal Barriers	4.11	0.78
Domain 3: Institutional Barriers	4.15	0.71

Education	4.10	0.82
Employment	4.20	0.67
Domain 4: Individual Barriers	3.52	1.15
Domain 5: Laws and Support	4.11	0.67
Legal Framework	4.23	0.72
Institutional Implementation	3.99	0.84
Domain scores were calculated as the mean of their respective items (range: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).		

4. DISCUSSION

This study represents one of the first quantitative attempts in Saudi Arabia to systematically examine the interplay between motivators and multi-level barriers influencing education and employment among women with disabilities. By adopting an integrated framework that simultaneously addresses internal drivers and external constraints, the study offers nuanced insights into a population that remains significantly underrepresented in both regional and international disability research.

The most striking finding is the exceptionally high levels of reported motivators, particularly within the psychological domain ($M = 4.75$). Participants expressed strong agreement that education and work enhance their self-confidence, sense of pride, and personal accomplishment. This result extends previous international literature that has identified intrinsic motivation as a key protective factor for individuals with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2018; Tefera et al., 2018). In the Saudi context, these elevated psychological and social motivators may reflect a growing sense of personal agency. However, this occurs alongside persistently high structural barriers, indicating that motivation alone is insufficient to overcome systemic constraints. This pattern may also reflect the influence of recent national initiatives, which have begun to reshape societal perceptions and create new expectations around inclusion. Unlike studies that have documented diminished motivation due to chronic marginalization (Shifrer & Frederick, 2019), the current findings suggest an emerging sense of empowerment among Saudi women with disabilities.

Nevertheless, strong internal motivation coexists with prominent external barriers. Both societal ($M = 4.11$) and institutional barriers ($M = 4.15$) received relatively high mean scores, confirming the persistence of structural obstacles despite legislative progress. These findings are consistent with a growing body of research highlighting how stigma, inaccessible infrastructure, and limited accommodations continue to constrain opportunities for women with disabilities (Karr et al., 2022; Pettinicchio et al., 2022; Abed et al., 2024). The slightly higher scores for employment-related

institutional barriers compared to education-related ones further suggest that the transition from education to the labour market remains a particularly vulnerable stage, echoing international evidence on labour market exclusion (Bredgaard & Salado-Rasmussen, 2021; Morwane et al., 2021).

A critical observation concerns the Laws and Support domain. While participants rated the legal framework relatively positively ($M = 4.23$), they perceived institutional implementation as noticeably weaker ($M = 3.99$). Although a difference was observed between perceptions of the legal framework and its implementation, this gap appears modest in magnitude and should be interpreted with caution in the absence of inferential testing. Nevertheless, previous research has repeatedly documented the disconnect between progressive disability policies and their practical enforcement (Alzahrani, 2023; Aldosari et al., 2025; AlTaleb et al., 2024). Such findings underscore a broader challenge in many middle-income countries where formal commitments to inclusion are not yet matched by effective systems of accountability and service delivery.

Interestingly, the Individual Barriers domain yielded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.52$). This suggests that participants attributed their difficulties more to external structural factors than to internal deficits, a perspective that strongly resonates with the social model of disability (Campbell et al., 2022). The relatively high standard deviation ($SD = 1.15$) in this domain, however, points to considerable heterogeneity in personal experiences, potentially reflecting differences in family support, resilience, and access to resources.

Disability type also emerged as an important differentiating factor. Women with visual impairment reported higher educational attainment, while those with physical disabilities showed superior previous work experience. In contrast, women with hearing impairment consistently reported the lowest outcomes. This finding may be partly explained by communication barriers, limited availability of sign language support, and reduced accessibility of both educational and workplace environments for individuals with hearing impairments. These patterns reinforce the

limitations of generic inclusion policies and highlight the need for more targeted, disability-specific interventions, as supported by previous research on accessibility and communication barriers (Atanga et al., 2020; Gowran et al., 2022; AlTaleb et al., 2024).

4.2. Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. It is among the first in the Saudi context to quantitatively integrate motivators and multi-level barriers within a single framework using a locally adapted instrument. The focus on women with disabilities addresses an important gap in the literature, and the inclusion of participants from three major regions enhances the contextual relevance of the findings. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, and the use of convenience sampling limits generalisability. The reliance on self-reported data may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive issues. Furthermore, the study did not include women with intellectual or multiple disabilities, whose experiences may differ substantially. In addition, the sample was drawn from three major urban regions where services and opportunities are more available, which may limit the generalisability of findings to rural or less-resourced areas and introduces potential urban selection bias.

4.3. Implications and Future Directions

The findings suggest that empowerment efforts should shift from solely enhancing individual motivation toward addressing structural and institutional barriers more effectively. Policymakers should prioritise closing the implementation gap through enforceable accountability mechanisms, targeted vocational training programmes, and disability-specific workplace accommodations.

To translate these findings into actionable change, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, government agencies should establish enforceable monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with existing disability inclusion policies, particularly in education and employment sectors. Second, targeted vocational training programmes tailored to different types of disabilities—especially for women with hearing impairments—should be expanded. Third, higher education institutions should invest in accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and inclusive learning environments. Fourth, employers should be incentivised through financial subsidies or tax benefits to adopt inclusive hiring practices and provide reasonable workplace accommodations. Fifth, national awareness campaigns should be strengthened to address persistent societal stigma toward women with disabilities. Finally, collaboration between policymakers, educational institutions, and disability organisations is essential to ensure that policies are effectively implemented and aligned with the lived experiences of women with disabilities.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs to track how motivators and barriers evolve over time, as well as mixed-methods approaches that capture the lived experiences of women with disabilities. Expanding the sample to include rural areas and diverse disability types would also strengthen the evidence base.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while Saudi women with disabilities possess considerable internal motivation, persistent structural barriers continue to constrain their educational and employment opportunities. Bridging the gap between policy aspiration and practical reality is essential for translating motivation into meaningful empowerment and achieving more equitable and inclusive development.

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