

THE PROFILE AND CHALLENGES OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Abstract: The article analyzes the complexities and difficulties faced by people with disabilities in the social and economic context of the Republic of Moldova. Globally, disability affects approximately 15% of the population, while in Moldova, in 2023, 6.5% of the population, or 162,300 individuals, faced some form of disability, including 10,900 children. The article highlights the close link between disability and poverty, emphasizing that disability not only exacerbates the risk of poverty but that poverty also increases the likelihood of disability.

The methodology of the article included an analysis of specialized literature, statistical data, and the legal framework, with results presenting the distribution of people with disabilities based on age, living environment, and degrees of disability. Data show a high concentration of people with disabilities in rural areas (63%) and severe economic vulnerability, amplified by the fact that disability pensions are insufficient to cover the minimum subsistence level. In 2023, the average disability pension was far below the minimum necessary for a decent life. Urgent reforms are proposed in the social protection system and measures to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities through more effective policies and adequate financial support.

Keywords: persons with disabilities, social protection, poverty, quality of life, Republic of Moldova

JEL Classification: I38, Z13

Introduction

Over one billion people, or approximately 15% of the global population, live with some form of disability, according to estimates by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). Of these, only 5% have congenital disabilities, while the rest are acquired throughout life due to accidents, illnesses, or natural aging processes. Disability is, therefore, a universal component of human experience, influenced by social, economic, and political factors, as well as unpredictable events such as accidents and armed conflicts.

Disability represents a complex development issue, closely linked to poverty. Not only does it increase the risk of poverty, but poverty itself also raises the likelihood of disability. People with low incomes are more exposed to conditions that can lead to disabilities and have limited resources to regain their work capacity, perpetuating the cycle of poverty for themselves and their families. It is estimated that up to 50% of disability cases could be prevented through effective poverty reduction measures and improved living conditions.

The United Nations Development Programme highlights that 80% of people with disabilities live in developing countries, while the World Bank estimates that 20% of the world's poorest individuals are

people with disabilities (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; World Bank, 2020). These figures underscore the profound connection between disability and poverty.

In this context, an integrated approach becomes essential, including preventive measures, early intervention, and continuous support. It is necessary not only to formulate appropriate public policies and ensure adequate funding but also to change society's perception of people with disabilities.

Methods and materials

The research employed various methods, including the analysis of specialized literature, the comparative method, and scientific abstraction. Additionally, statistical data and the legal and regulatory framework in the field of disability protection were analyzed. Studies and reports on the situation of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova, as well as those from the United Nations and the World Bank, were reviewed.

The informational support for the research was provided by national and international scientific publications, statistical data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, and other online accessible resources.

Results and discussions

Disability refers to a condition in which a person, due to a physical or mental impairment, loses the ability to perform normal functions, either temporarily or permanently. According to Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), "Persons with disabilities include those 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" (EUAA). Disabilities can be physical (e.g., paralysis, limb loss, deafness), psychological (e.g., depression or post-traumatic stress disorder), or intellectual (e.g., learning disabilities). Some individuals are born with certain disabilities, while others acquire them as a result of accidents or illnesses.

According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), in the Republic of Moldova in 2023, there were 162,300 registered persons with disabilities, including 10,900 children (NBS, 2022). This group represents 6.5% of the population, with children with disabilities accounting for approximately 2% of the total number of children in the country. Between 2019 and 2023, the total number of persons with disabilities decreased by 7.8%, while the number of children with disabilities increased by 2.8%. This trend can be attributed to factors such as declining birth rates and forced migration. Some individuals with disabilities, or those who might develop disabilities, choose to emigrate in search of better living conditions, which impacts demographic statistics.

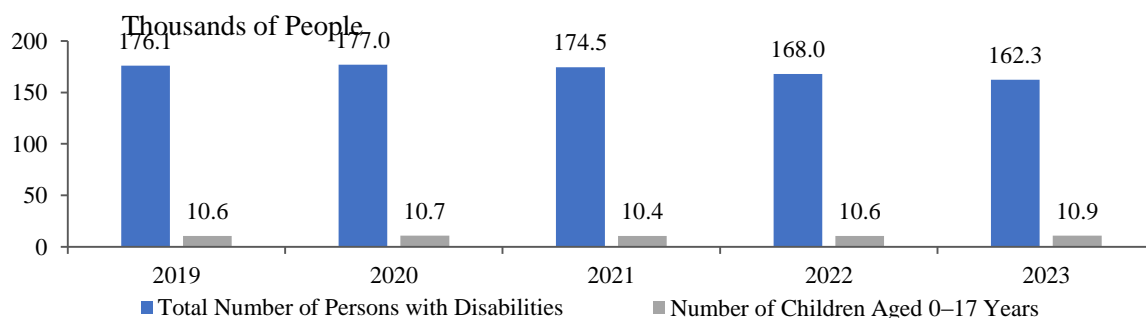
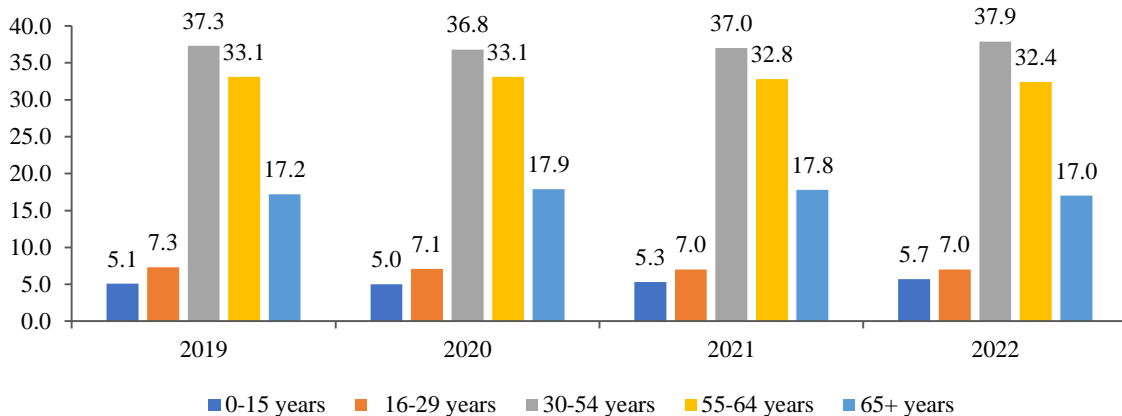


Figure 1. Number of recognized persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova as of January 1st

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

Analyzing the age group distribution, it is observed that the majority of persons with disabilities fall within the 30–45 age range. The higher prevalence of disabilities in this age group indicates an increased incidence of challenging working conditions or chronic illnesses that affect this demographic. Specifically, approximately 37.9% of persons with disabilities are aged 30 to 45, 32.4% are between 55 and 64 years old, 17.0% are 65 years and older, 7.0% fall into the 16–29 age range, and



5.7% are children aged 0 to 15 years.

Figure 2. Distribution of persons with disabilities by age groups (%)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

Another alarming aspect is the disproportionate distribution of persons with disabilities based on their living environment. In rural areas, 63% of these individuals reside, reflecting limited access to medical, educational, and employment services. The lack of these resources significantly contributes to increased poverty and social exclusion among persons with disabilities in rural areas, further amplifying inequalities and difficulties in their social and professional integration.

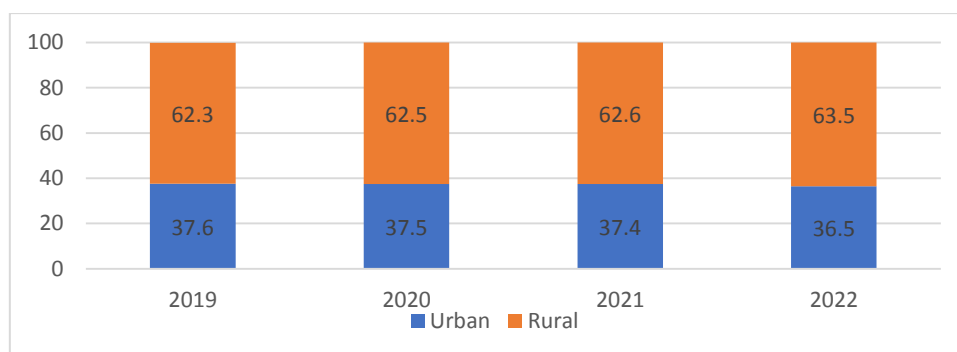


Figure 3. Distribution of persons with disabilities by residence environment (%)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

In the Republic of Moldova, the classification system for disabilities includes three main degrees, each reflecting the severity of functional impairments (Law No. 60 of March 30, 2012, on the Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, Article 16):

- *Severe disability*: Severe functional impairments leading to activity limitations and participation restrictions, with a work capacity retained between 0–20%.
- *Accentuated disability*: Accentuated functional impairments leading to activity limitations and participation restrictions, with a work capacity retained between 25–40%.
- *Moderate disability*: Moderate functional impairments leading to activity limitations and participation restrictions, with a work capacity retained between 45–60%.

Analyzing the distribution of persons with disabilities by established degrees, it is observed that 56% fall into the category of accentuated disability, 28% have moderate disabilities, and 16% are considered to have severe disabilities. Compared to 2021, there is a noticeable increase in the proportion of persons with severe and moderate disabilities, while the share of those with accentuated disabilities has decreased.

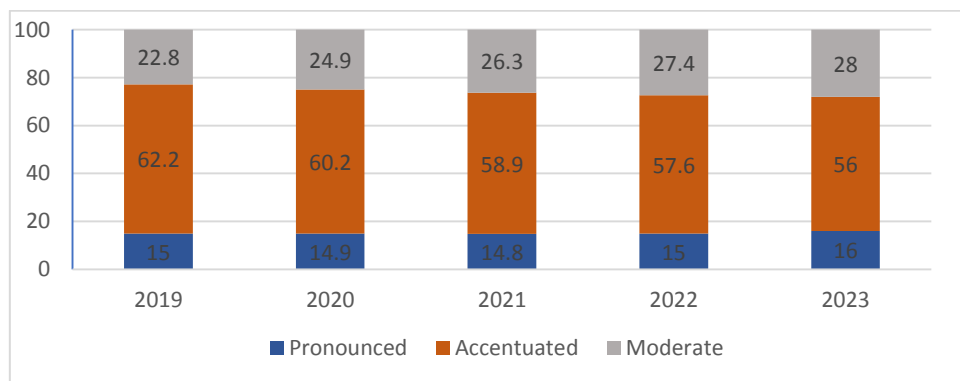


Figure 4. Distribution of persons with disabilities by degree of disability as of January 1st (%)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova (2022), Statistical compendium.

At the same time, there is an upward trend in the number of persons with primary disabilities in recent years. According to data from the National Council for the Determination of Disability and Work Capacity, in 2022, 14.2 thousand people requested evaluations, of which 12.1 thousand (85.0%) were recognized as having primary disabilities (NBS, 2022). Among them, 10.5 thousand were adults (86.8%), and 1.6 thousand were children (13.2%). The proportion of persons with primary disabilities was significantly higher in rural areas, reaching 62.8% in 2022.

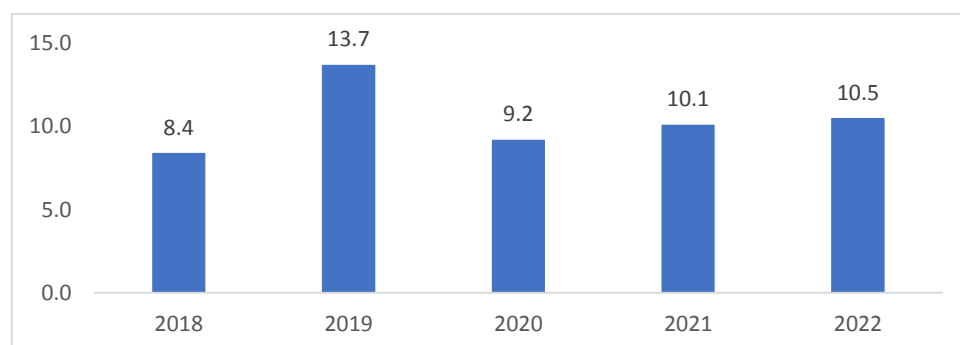


Figure 5. Number of adults with primary disabilities (thousands)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

The main causes leading to the recognition of primary disability were tumors (16.4%), disorders of the osteoarticular system, muscles, and connective tissue (16.0%), and circulatory system diseases (15.8%). Approximately one thousand individuals were diagnosed with primary disabilities due to mental and behavioral disorders (10.3%), while around seven hundred cases were attributed to nervous system diseases (7.6%). In urban areas, tumors were the predominant cause (19.3%), whereas in rural areas, disorders of the osteoarticular system, muscles, and connective tissue were more prevalent (16.9%).

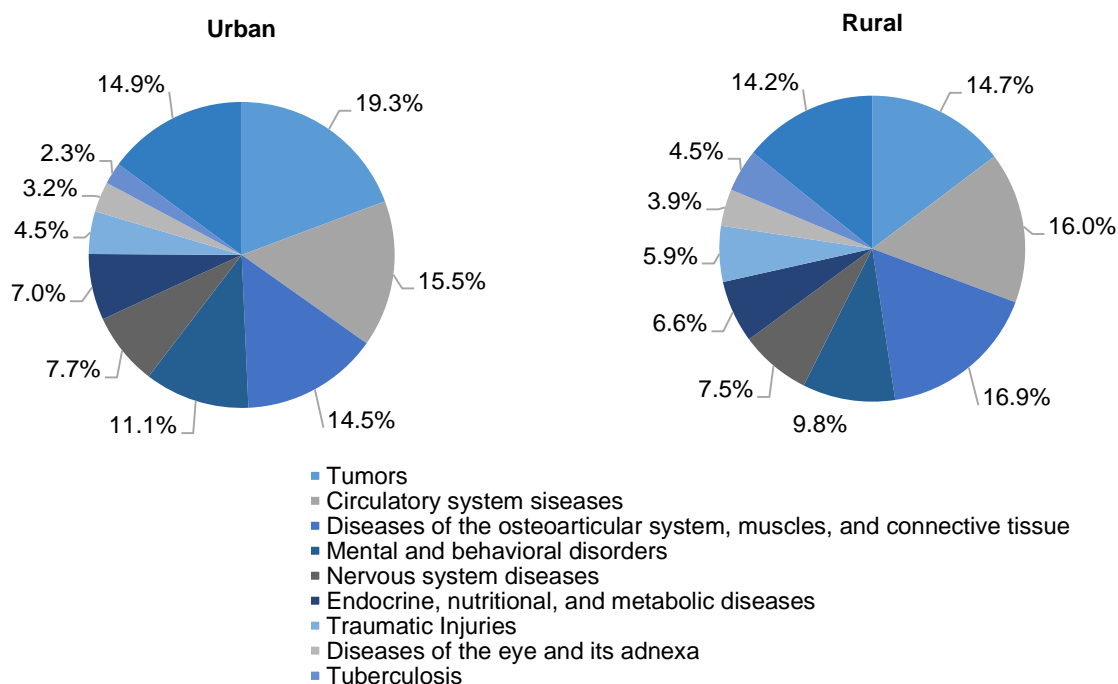


Figure 6. Structure of persons recognized with primary disabilities by residence and causes, 2022

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

An analysis of the social protection of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova shows that these individuals benefit from various types of assistance, including pensions and social allowances (such as social aid and compensation for the cold season), social services (home care, personal assistance), and facilities to access public services. However, the value of these benefits is often insufficient to meet the real needs of persons with disabilities.

According to data provided by the National Social Insurance House, as of January 1, 2023, the average disability pension was 2,104.3 lei, significantly lower than the average pension for all retirees, which was 3,156.4 lei (CNAS, 2023). This significant disparity highlights the inequity in the pension system, where persons with disabilities receive lower amounts despite often having greater financial needs.

The pension amount varies depending on the degree of disability but remains insufficient in all cases. Persons with moderate disabilities receive an average of 1,572.2 lei, those with accentuated disabilities receive 2,260.4 lei, and those with severe disabilities receive 2,557.6 lei. Although these pensions are differentiated based on the severity of the disability, they fail to cover the complex needs and high costs associated with disabilities.

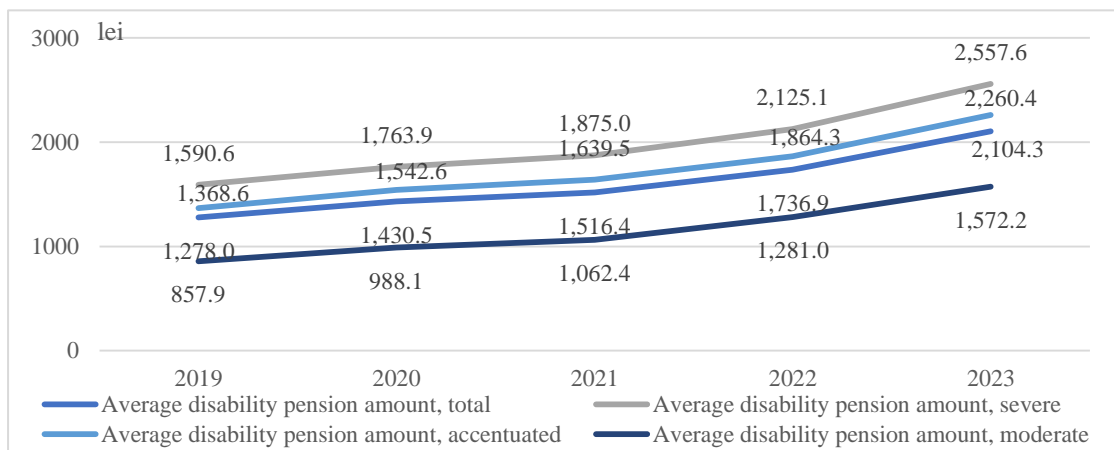


Figure 7. Average disability pension by categories of pensions as of January 1st

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

It is also crucial to emphasize that, in 2023, the subsistence minimum in the Republic of Moldova was set at 2,877.1 lei per month per person. In contrast, the average disability pension, at just 2,104.3 lei, covered approximately 73% of this amount, highlighting a significant shortfall in the income necessary to meet essential needs such as food, clothing, housing, utilities, and other basic expenses. These data clearly show that disability pensions, regardless of the degree of severity, fail to cover the minimum expenses necessary for an adequate standard of living. The situation is even more alarming for persons with moderate disabilities, whose pensions are considerably below the subsistence minimum, exposing them to heightened vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion. The lack of adequate financial resources exacerbates the socio-economic integration challenges faced by this vulnerable group, underscoring the urgent need for reforms in the social protection system (Gutium, 2021).

This economic reality is not just a matter of statistics; it reflects the daily difficulties faced by thousands of individuals. For those living with disabilities, each day brings new challenges, and the lack of adequate financial support only worsens the situation. They often have to choose between fundamental necessities such as food or medication, paying utilities, or purchasing hygiene products. The financial deficit undermines not only physical health but also dignity and quality of life, turning daily existence into a continuous struggle for survival.

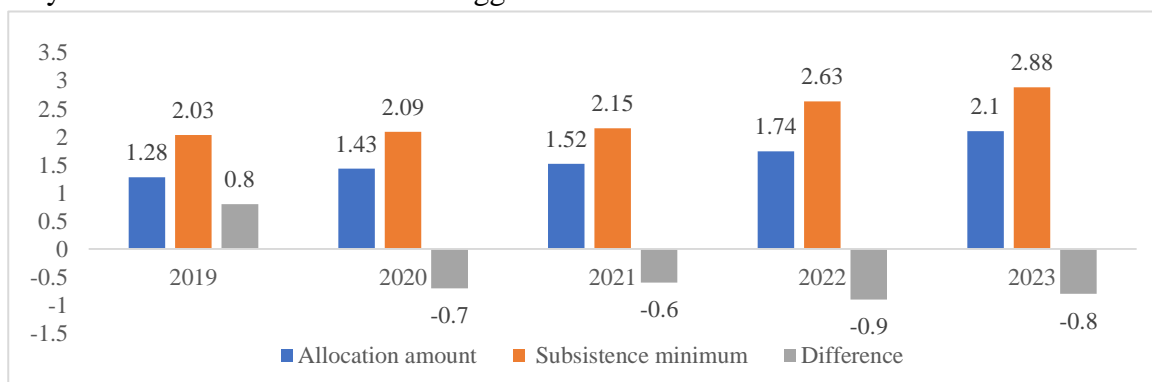


Figure 8. Difference between the average monthly disability pension and the subsistence minimum (thousands of lei)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2023), Subsistence minimum by population categories, years, environments, and semesters.

Persons with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of poverty compared to those without disabilities. According to data from the Household Budget Survey conducted by the NBS in 2023, the absolute poverty rate among persons with disabilities was 42%, 11.5 percentage points higher than the rate for persons without disabilities (30.5%).

Poverty does not only affect persons with disabilities at an individual level but also the households in which they live. Large families, especially those that include persons with disabilities, are at a heightened risk of poverty. Current social benefits fail to ensure a minimum national income level for persons with disabilities, as they are directed toward individual beneficiaries and do not account for the needs of the household as a whole. Although financial assistance is differentiated by categories of disabilities, it is based on a principle of "deservingness" rather than objective criteria of necessity, limiting the effectiveness of support in reducing poverty among these individuals and their families. Another critical aspect to address is the employment level of persons with disabilities, which directly reflects the challenges they face in the labor market. According to NBS data, in 2022, only 15.2% of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova were employed, compared to 40.5% of persons without disabilities. This significant disparity highlights the major barriers that persons with disabilities must overcome to access employment.

One of the primary factors contributing to this situation is the lack of necessary workplace adaptations, such as physical accessibility and adjustments to job tasks based on employees' individual capacities (Balan, 2021). Additionally, employers' prejudices regarding the abilities of persons with disabilities constitute a major obstacle to their employment, further limiting their chances of integration into the labor market. By comparison, Eurostat statistics show that in the European Union, the employment rate of persons with disabilities is 50.8%, compared to 75% for persons without disabilities (European Commission, 2021).

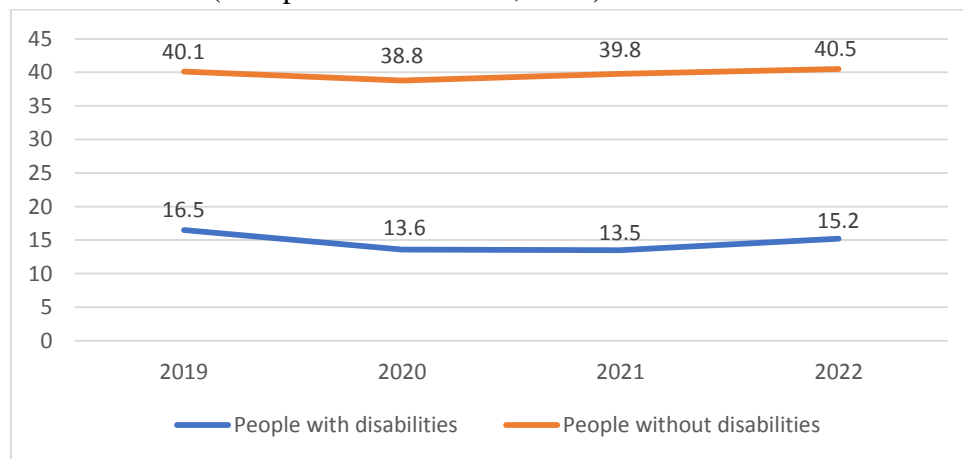


Figure 9. Employment rate of persons with and without disabilities (%)

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

On the other hand, employed persons with disabilities are predominantly found in low-productivity sectors, such as agriculture. NBS data indicates that approximately 34.2% of employed persons with disabilities work in the agricultural sector, a field characterized by low productivity that requires minimal qualifications and skills. This highlights a concerning trend, especially considering that only

10% of persons with disabilities have higher education, which limits their access to better-paying jobs and often compels them to work in precarious conditions.

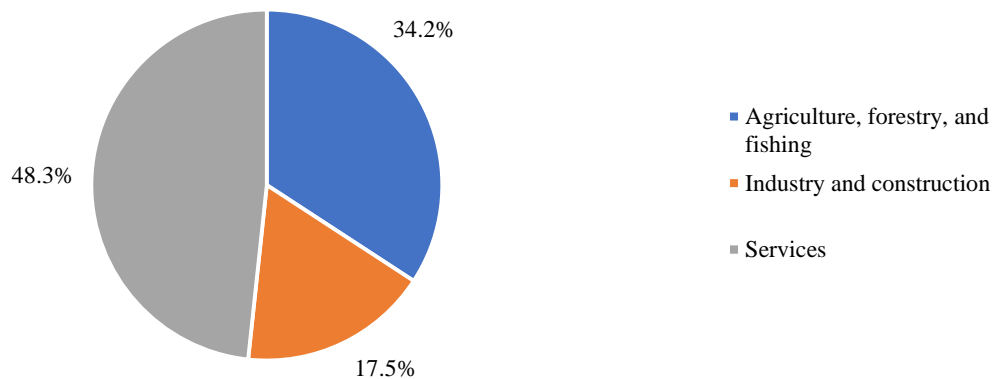


Figure 10. Employed persons with disabilities by economic sectors, 2022

Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), Persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2022.

These realities underscore the urgent need to implement more effective measures for labor market inclusion. Such measures should include not only workplace adaptations that address the individual needs of persons with disabilities but also vocational training and education programs that facilitate their integration into higher-productivity economic sectors and better working conditions.

To improve the situation of people with disabilities in the labor market, it is important to implement concrete and effective measures, such as:

- Providing clear financial incentives to employers, such as partial or total exemptions from income tax and social security contributions. These fiscal benefits would encourage the employment of people with disabilities and reduce economic barriers for companies.
- Authorities must play an important role in creating an accessible and adapted work environment for people with disabilities. This includes not only adjusting workplaces to their needs but also efficiently using budgetary resources for projects that directly impact inclusion.
- The state could partially subsidize the salaries of people with disabilities, thus reducing the financial burden on employers. This measure would increase the attractiveness of hiring people with disabilities and contribute to raising the employment rate among them.
- Although the legislation sets a 5% employment quota for companies with more than 20 employees, its implementation is often ineffective. Introducing real sanctions for employers who do not comply with the employment quotas would stimulate compliance. The funds obtained could be used to create new jobs or finance professional integration programs (Balan, 2021).
- Developing training and retraining programs for people with disabilities to increase their chances of integration into the labor market. Encouraging employers to develop such initiatives would contribute to creating an inclusive and competitive work environment.

- Implementation of an integrated employment policy system that includes rehabilitation, vocational training, counseling, and active support in the job search process, with the aim of ensuring the effective integration of people with disabilities into the labor market (Shevchenko, 2013).

The implementation of these measures would lead to an increased employment rate among people with disabilities and better integration into the labor market. Additionally, it is essential to adopt further measures to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities, such as:

- Establishing a subsistence minimum tailored to the needs of people with disabilities. Currently, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) annually sets the subsistence minimum for various population categories (children, pensioners, working-age adults), but there is no specific minimum for people with disabilities. They often have additional needs, such as medical expenses, assistive equipment, or caregiving services. A tailored subsistence minimum should reflect these specificities. Regular assessments of actual living costs and adjusting social benefits based on inflation would ensure a decent and inclusive standard of living for this group.
- Adjusting disability pensions to the level of the subsistence minimum. Aligning disability pensions with the subsistence minimum would help reduce poverty among people with disabilities and their families. A review of eligibility criteria and the implementation of a transparent calculation mechanism are necessary to eliminate current inequities in the pension system.
- Developing essential infrastructure and services in rural areas. Expanding and adapting health and education infrastructure (health centers, accessible schools) in rural areas would improve access to basic services for people with disabilities. Additionally, mobility programs would facilitate access to educational and employment opportunities, thus reducing regional disparities.
- Implementing support programs for families caring for individuals with severe disabilities. These programs should provide not only financial assistance but also educational resources and psychological support for caregivers. Community support initiatives could encourage experience sharing among families, helping enhance caregivers' capacity to cope with daily challenges.

Conclusions

The analysis of the situation of persons with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova highlights several critical aspects that require attention and serious interventions. First, the age group distribution reveals a significant prevalence of disabilities among individuals aged 30 to 45 years. This suggests a strong correlation between working conditions, chronic illnesses, and the onset of disabilities. Furthermore, the high number of persons with disabilities in rural areas underscores the need to improve access to medical, educational, and employment opportunities in these disadvantaged regions.

Although the total number of persons with disabilities has decreased in recent years, the alarming increase in the number of children with disabilities indicates an urgent need to intensify preventive measures and provide adequate support to families facing these challenges.

Data on pensions and other forms of social protection for persons with disabilities reveal a significant gap between the real needs of these individuals and the financial support provided. The average disability pension remains below the subsistence minimum, which affects the quality of life of those affected and contributes to the perpetuation of poverty.

In this context, it is important that public policies in the Republic of Moldova adopt an integrated approach to address all aspects faced by persons with disabilities. These policies should aim not only at improving health and social assistance services but also at facilitating access to education and

employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas. Only through a comprehensive and consistent approach can we ensure a real improvement in living conditions for persons with disabilities and a deeper integration of these individuals into society.

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