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Exploring the Employment Experiences of People with Physical Disabilities in Vietnam: Towards Inclusive Workplaces

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Abstract: Despite advancements in legal protections for people with disabilities in Vietnam, significant barriers to employment persist. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam. Semi-structured interviews with 15 participants employed across different sectors were thematically analysed, with the ecological systems theory applied as a guiding framework to interpret the findings and implications. Three primary themes were revealed: accessibility, vulnerability, and discrimination and ableism. The results also emphasised the importance of positive attitudes and interactions from co-workers and supervisors in fostering inclusive workplaces. Recommendations include policy reforms for attitudinal shifts, focus on equity to improve workplace culture, and the involvement of people with disabilities in organisational decision making. These actions are essential for creating more diverse and inclusive workplaces in Vietnam, where employees with physical disabilities feel included, valued, and empowered.

Keywords: physical disabilities; employment; inclusive workplace; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Employment is a fundamental human right for all people, including people with disabilities, according to the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) [1,2]. Employment is essential not only for financial independence but also as a means for self-expression and self-identity, physical and mental health, and for enabling an individual's contribution to society [3–6]. However, people with disabilities around the world face greater challenges in securing employment, resulting in lower employment rates and poorer job security than people without disabilities [7,8]. As a result, people with disabilities, particularly in lower and middle-income countries, often live below the poverty line [9,10].

This study advances the understanding of employment for people with physical disabilities by contributing valuable insights within the relatively under-researched cultural context of Vietnam. In Vietnam, approximately 7% of the population, or around 6.2 million individuals, live with some form of disability, nearly half (49.7%) of whom have physical disabilities [11]. Approximately half (54.3%) of people with physical disabilities are employed. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities in Vietnam is three times higher (14% vs. 4.3%) than that for people without disabilities [12,13]. Moreover, in Vietnam, there is no nationally coordinated disability support system as in developed countries, and people with disabilities often experience discrimination and stigma in their employment [14]. There has been limited but growing interest and efforts among NGOs in

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Vietnam to improve the unemployment rate and inclusion of people with disabilities in workplaces. In addition, there is increasing reliance on the grey literature or reports from international non-government organisations (INGOs) which have focused on how to create more job opportunities for people with disabilities or how to support them in integrating into society. However, no study has specifically explored the experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam from their perspective and what they need to integrate into the workplace as employees. This issue underscores the urgent need for localised knowledge and a greater contextual understanding of the central phenomenon. The phenomenon under study in this research, therefore, is the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam. This includes examining the barriers they face, such as accessibility issues and societal attitudes, as well as the positive factors that contribute to their inclusion in the workplace. By using a qualitative phenomenological approach, we aimed to deeply understand the nuances of these employment experiences from the perspectives of the individuals themselves, providing insights into how the employment conditions and inclusivity for people with disabilities may be improved.

1.1. Disability Law and Policy in Vietnam

The Government of Vietnam has enacted laws and policies to improve employment opportunities and integration for people with disabilities. Therefore, Vietnam has aligned with international standards by acceding to the UNCRPD in 2007 and ratifying it without reservations in 2014. The 2010 Law on Persons with Disabilities (LPD) marked a shift from a charity-based approach to one rooted in human rights, aiming to ensure equal employment opportunities through enhanced accessibility and reasonable workplace accommodations [1,15]. For instance, the term tan tat (a Vietnamese word for handicap) has been replaced with khuyet tat (meaning 'disability' or 'persons with disability') in Vietnam's legal documents and government discourse [16] (p. 17). That change reflects a greater understanding of inclusive language, a reduced focus on impairment, and a heightened recognition of the potential capability of people with disabilities.

The Labour Code amendments in 1994, 2013, and notably in 2019 further safeguarded employees with disabilities against exploitation and ensured their consent for night shifts, overtime, or hazardous tasks. These amendments also standardised a maximum of eight working hours per day and granted employees with disabilities 14 sick leave days, two more than employees without disabilities [17,18]. The establishment of the National Coordinating Council on Disability (NCCD) in 2001 further aims to implement both UNCRPD and LPD effectively at the local level, promoting equal opportunities in education, employment, and social integration [19].

1.2. Employment of People with Disabilities in Vietnam

Despite these legislative advancements, people with disabilities in Vietnam encounter multiple barriers to entering and remaining in the labour market. Vietnam's shift to a market-oriented economy has spurred rapid growth, which has been driven by manufacturing, agriculture, services, and increasing digitalisation. Despite this progress, employment for people with disabilities remains scarce and often confined to informal or low-skilled roles [20]. A UNDP (2020) [13] report identifies these barriers, which include discrimination, insufficient support and training, and a lack of accessible infrastructure in buildings, transport, and education institutions. Furthermore, Vietnamese culture, influenced by Confucian values, emphasises family duty, social harmony, and respect for authority [21]. While these principles foster strong community bonds, they can also reinforce the stigmatisation of disability by framing people with disabilities as dependent, burdensome, or less capable of participating in the collective good. This is compounded by the prevailing medical model

of disability, which highlights individual impairments rather than recognising the role of society in enabling people with disabilities to contribute and be treated equally [22,23]. Historical beliefs have often stigmatised disability as a familial curse, with derogatory terminology prevalent in legal and societal discourses [24,25]. While there has been progress in community attitudes, this stigmatisation still leads to discrimination and employer reluctance to hire people with disabilities. This highlights the need to delve deeper into the experiences of employees with disabilities to understand the current workplace dynamics.

Low educational levels and physical and social barriers further exacerbate unemployment rates among people with physical disabilities. A significant number (25.57%) have low levels of literacy, with only one-third (33.56%) having attended high school and the majority (93.4%) not having attained a tertiary degree [11]. This is often due to inaccessible educational facilities and insufficiently trained teachers, particularly in rural areas [13,26]. Many people with disabilities experience limited access to vocational training, training programmes that are poorly aligned with the job market, and low awareness of available employment services [13,20].

Even people with disabilities who manage to secure employment in Vietnam continue to struggle with workplace integration. They often face issues, including unfair contracts, lower wages, and fewer advancement opportunities compared to their counterparts without disabilities [27,28]. Highlighting this anomaly, recent research and government reports [29,30] have found that many managers in Vietnam remain unaware of the laws and regulations that support employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Many employers also hold unconscious biases or misconceptions regarding the capacities of people with disabilities, which reinforces structural barriers to equitable employment [13]. Thus, there are efforts needed to better inform managers and to cultivate workplace cultures that value all employees equally.

While the existing studies contribute valuable insights into the policies and methods of promoting employment opportunities for people with disabilities (e.g., [13,31]), there remains a pressing need for a deeper understanding of the diverse employment experiences of people with physical disabilities. Previous studies have predominantly been conducted using quantitative methods focusing on policy, practice, and economic life. This approach may not have fully captured the lived experiences of people with physical disabilities across Vietnam's employment sectors [29].

1.3. Inclusionary Practice in the Workplace

Inclusion practices have increasingly been recognised globally for their importance in creating supportive work environments, particularly for employees with disabilities. Psychologically, inclusion means employees feel accepted and valued as insiders by their peers, which is a fundamental human need for belonging and uniqueness [32,33]. Organisationally, the concept of inclusion involves adopting practices and policies that promote equal opportunities and participation to foster a positive workplace environment and yield benefits in improved productivity and business reputation [34–36]. Effective inclusion practices address disability discrimination, promote effective leadership, and enhance the workplace contributions of employees with disabilities [37–39]. In Vietnam, research on inclusive workplaces remains scarce; however, Luu [40] and Tuan et al. [41] found that disability inclusion practices positively affected the engagement and wellbeing of employees with disabilities and strengthened the overall organisational culture, but their studies were limited in detail that would lead to an understanding at the team and individual levels. Our study, therefore, sought insights directly from employees with disabilities which we believe are essential for developing effective implementation strategies for future inclusive workplaces [42].

1.4. Aim of the Study

This study aimed to address the significant gap in qualitative research on the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam. By focusing on the voices and perspectives of people with physical disabilities that have been unheard and undervalued [43], this research sought to identify ways to improve employment conditions and promote workplace equality and inclusion in Vietnam. To achieve the research aim, the study answers the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of people with physical disabilities in finding, maintaining, being promoted, and changing employment?
2. What support do people with physical disabilities require for employment and how are their needs met/unmet?

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative approach in conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposively sampled group of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam. This method enabled the researchers to gain a more profound insight into the participants' situations and environments by engaging with their narratives and personal accounts [44]. The qualitative interview method also provided opportunities for the participants to voice their lived experiences and for the events in their lives to be chronicled for the benefit of all people through an increased understanding of their perspectives [45,46].

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The research adopted Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory [47] to consider the themes from the findings and broader literature. This theory organises environmental influences affecting individual development into four interconnected layers: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) macrosystem [47]. The microsystem consists of immediate environments, including the interactions and relationships directly experienced by an individual such as co-workers and supervisors. The mesosystem connects various microsystems, demonstrating how interactions within one setting, such as the workplace, can impact relationships in another, influencing communication and dynamics between individuals with their co-workers or supervisors. The exosystem includes wider contextual factors that indirectly affect individual experiences, such as employer policies and practices. Finally, the macrosystem encompasses broader societal norms and values, including stigmas and cultural beliefs about disability. By examining the dynamic interplay between these systems, the study provided a nuanced understanding of how societal and organisational factors collectively shape employment experiences for people with physical disabilities in Vietnam.

2.2. Research Process

2.2.1. Recruitment

In selecting a study site, the research team referred to the 2016 national disability survey by the Vietnam GSO [11]. The survey revealed that many people with disabilities who possess the capacity to work reside in major urban centres, with the highest prevalence in the Red River Delta, North Central and Central Coast, and South East regions at 5.9%, 7.55%, and 4.19%, respectively. These regions included the cities of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, and Da Nang, which offer job opportunities attracting working-age people with physical disabilities [11]. Hence, the study focused on participants working in these three cities to capture a diverse range of workplace experiences.

Participants were purposively sampled based on having a physical disability and recent employment, specifically targeting those who were employed within the past 12 months. Conducting the research remotely from Australia initially posed recruitment challenges. To address this, the snowball sampling method [48,49] was employed. The initial contacts were made through a disability organisation in Vietnam, and subsequent participants were recruited via referrals. Ethical integrity was upheld by ensuring only the people who were voluntarily interested in participating in the study were contacted, obtaining informed consent, and maintaining strict confidentiality of participant identities.

2.2.2. Participant Details

The study involved 15 participants with physical disabilities comprising 11 females and four males, all aged 23 to 43 (average age 33). Their disability primarily affected their arms, hands, legs, or mobility. Seven participants use a wheelchair, three use a wheelchair and crutches, four participants have short stature, and one has a hand disability. Educational backgrounds were varied: seven participants held university degrees, four completed high school, two completed grades 8 and 10, one completed primary school, and one had no formal education. Employment spanned national and international public sectors, NGOs, and social enterprises, with roles ranging from frontline staff to leadership positions. Employment durations ranged from two months to five years. Twelve participants were employed full-time, while three had recently left their jobs at the time of the interview. See Table 1 for participant information.

Table 1. Participant demographic details.

No.	ID	Gender	Age	Location	Disability	Qualification	Type of Work	Duration of Employment	Employment Type	Working Status
1	HN01	F	26	HN	Short stature	12/12	Team Leader	5 y	VN Social Enterprise	Quit job (6 m)
2	HN02	F	29	HN	Short stature	University	Photo Editor	3 y	International Company	Still working
3	HN03	F	40	HN	Uses wheelchair	12/12	Photo Editor	5 y	International Company	Still working
4	HN04	F	26	HN	Uses a wheelchair and crutches	University	Project Intern	9 m	NGO	Still working
5	HN05	M	35	HN	Uses wheelchair	0/12	Officer cum Grocery Assistant	3 y	Government Organisation	Still working
6	DN01	M	27	DN	Short stature	12/12	Design Manager	3 y	Vietnam Company	Still working
7	DN02	F	34	DN	Uses a wheelchair and crutches	12/12	Officer	5 y	Vietnam Company	Still working
8	DN03	F	29	DN	Uses wheelchair	8/12	Photo Editor	8 m	International Company	Still working
9	DN04	M	42	DN	Uses wheelchair	10/12	Photo Editor	1 y	International Company	Still working
10	HCM1	F	38	HCM	Uses a wheelchair and crutches	University	Accountant	1.5 y	Vietnam Company	Still working
11	HCM2	F	27	HCM	Uses wheelchair	University	Customer Service Officer	2 m	Vietnam Company	Quit job (2 d)
12	HCM3	F	26	HCM	Uses wheelchair	University	Teacher	2.5 y	Vietnam Special Kindergarten	Still working
13	HCM04	M	25	HCM	Short stature	5/12	Camera Observation Officer	3 y	Vietnam Company	Quit job (7 m)
14	HCM05	F	23	HCM	Hand disability	University	Accountant	1.5 y	NGO	Still working
15	HCM06	F	32	HCM	Uses wheelchair	University	Sales and Marketing Team Leader	3 y	Vietnam Company	Still working

2.2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through online in-depth semi-structured interviews using Microsoft Teams [50] from December 2023 to January 2024. Phenomenological interviews are informal and interactive, which utilise open-ended questions to enable participants to express their experiences authentically and minimise the influence of the researcher's perspectives [51,52]. One-on-one interviews were conducted in Vietnamese language, averaging 100 min, and were scheduled at the participants' convenience. The questions were reviewed by a Vietnamese person with a physical disability before the interviews were conducted to assess clarity. These questions covered the participants' experiences in job seeking, advancement, and transitions, alongside the workplace support they received. The primary researcher (HN) conducted interviews with assistance and consultations from co-researchers (JA and MB—supervisors) [53]. After the initial participant interview, the transcript was translated, shared with the research team, and used to refine the subsequent interviews. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed by the first researcher. The recordings and transcripts were securely stored on Flinders University's computers, with each participant's name given a pseudonym code to ensure anonymity.

2.2.4. Data Analysis

The primary researcher (HN), a native Vietnamese speaker, transcribed all the recorded interviews verbatim and translated them into English. These translations were reviewed by a second native Vietnamese speaker with qualifications in English Translation and TESOL to ensure accuracy and credibility. The English transcripts were then sent to the JA and MB for data analysis. The transcripts were imported into NVivo 14, a qualitative data analysis software hosted by Flinders University, and analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis [53,54]. The analysis began with HN and JA independently coding the data and collaboratively categorising these codes into main themes in an inductive approach using Braun and Clarke's four-step framework [53]. HN also read the transcripts in Vietnamese and generated codes in English to capture the nuance of the participants' narratives [55].

Two coding cycles were conducted: open codes were first aligned with research questions [56] and then secondary descriptive coding [57] was applied to organise the initial codes. From these codes, themes were generated, reviewed, and refined to identify patterns. Finally, overarching themes were identified to capture collective insights of the research team after further meetings, crosschecks, and adjustments.

2.2.5. Ethical Consideration

To enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of this study, several measures were implemented to ensure accuracy and credibility in data collection and analysis [52]. All the interviews were conducted and transcribed by the same researcher (HN) to ensure consistency throughout the process. An interview guide was used to maintain uniformity, and a pilot interview allowed the refinement of questions to improve validity. The participants were invited to review their transcripts and provide feedback to confirm an accurate representation of their experiences. These steps helped minimise researcher bias and ensured that the findings reflected the participants' authentic voices and perspectives.

Ethics approval for the study (project number 6627) was granted by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University.

3. Results

The results were organised around the three themes: accessibility, vulnerability, and discrimination and ableism, which were identified from the qualitative analyses. Each was presented clearly with supporting statements made by the interviewees.

3.1. Accessibility

The participants reported their personal experiences, providing a picture of the range of accessibility issues. These include physical access barriers in their workplace, low adoption of flexible working arrangements, and limited awareness and policies relating to accessibility and inclusion in the workplace.

3.1.1. Physical Access Barriers

The participants described diverse experiences regarding physical accessibility at their workplaces. While a minority had access to inclusive facilities like restrooms, parking, cafeterias, ramps, and elevators, enhancing their mobility and convenience, the majority faced significant access challenges. Common issues included the absence of suitable ramps, unsafe motorcycle ramps, and difficulties with public transportation accessibility, compelling some to resort to highly dangerous commutes on three-wheel motorbikes over 15–20 km. Many participants struggled with high desks, heavy doors, and stairs or small door sizes of restrooms and cafeterias. Isolation was exacerbated for two participants working on separate floors from all their co-workers without disabilities due to the absence of an elevator. To overcome these physical barriers, three participants reported that their employers had provided temporary solutions, which they described as a *special privilege*, such as allowing them to eat lunch at their workspaces, a customised table, or working from home. One participant using a wheelchair shared her experience:

> "*The desk was quite high, and I am quite short, so I was always having to reach up when working, which was very tiring. After four months, my manager saw the problem and had a desk made specifically for me. Having that desk has made it easier for me to work*."
>
> (DN03)

The participants who struggle with inaccessible workplace accommodations adopted a range of coping strategies. These entailed using small plastic chairs under the table to "*protect the foot from fatigue*", (HN04), building a temporary wooden ramp to access the office building using personal funds, bringing their own toilet equipment when going to the bathroom, or even forgoing their lunch or break to avoid bothering others. Almost all persuaded themselves to accept workplace inaccessibility as normal, with one participant, for instance, rationalising his acceptance of workplace physical barriers by focusing on the broader benefits of secure employment.

> "*In the beginning, I already felt that [workplace physical barriers] were not okay and that it was very unsafe for my disability condition. But finding another job is already difficult for a normal person, and it's ten times harder for someone like me. So, I kept convincing myself to try my best to stick with that job*."
>
> (HN05)

The participants also highlighted feeling devalued when their employers ignored their need for reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Over half of the participants felt that employers often prioritised profit over employees' welfare, with "*things [people with disability's need] that seem too insignificant often overlooked*", as participant HCM01 pointed out.

3.1.2. Flexible Working Arrangements

While flexible working arrangements aim to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities, the study participants revealed numerous challenges. Half highlighted struggles related to work hours, including changes to schedules every fortnight, with night shifts impacting their health and wellbeing, leading to symptoms of insomnia, weight loss, and headaches. In severe cases, some participants had to resign. The participants also faced the pressure of general key performance indicators (KPIs) as one noted: "*I face added pressure, like meeting KPIs, which very exhausting. It's really hard to meet it [KPIs]*," (HN03). This highlighted that there were no modifications to KPIs for employees with disabilities, which resulted in the dual burden of managing health and work demands. This often led to reduced income and compromised work efficiency.

Furthermore, accessing sick or personal leave proved difficult. Some participants reported their managers did not approve of sick leave without a medical certificate, while one participant was severely scolded for even asking for leave. This requirement complicated matters for the participants who had unpredictable health conditions. As one participant explained, workers with disabilities are prone to fatigue and health complications, yet they might not be able to visit a doctor owing to the cost and inconvenience:

> "*The health of a person with disability like me can be unpredictable; I might feel tired and need to take a leave tomorrow, but I still have to work. When my health is not good, how can I work productively? Without enough rest, my health condition becomes worse, and it takes a long time to get better*."
>
> (DN03)

In contrast, some positive outcomes were reported by the participants who received thoughtful accommodation tailored to their specific needs. Two accountants, for example, benefited from workplace adjustments, such as the delegation of tax finalisation tasks to branch accountants or the coverage of transportation costs for parcel delivery and office supply purchases. These significantly eased their mobility difficulties and enhanced their productivity.

3.1.3. Awareness of Government and Workplace Policies

Twelve employee participants reported they had a complete lack of awareness regarding the institutional or organisational policies designed to facilitate job access and promote an inclusive workplace for people with disabilities. Echoing this sentiment, one participant recounted, "*I'm not even sure if there are policies for people like me*', (HCM02) and "*I received organisational legislations as normal people*" (HN03). This highlights the absence of specialised communication for people with disabilities regarding such policies.

The majority had similar experiences, stating they had never received information about such policies from either the government or their employers. Others reported that limited employment opportunities restricted their awareness and experience of policy availability. Nevertheless, one participant reported being permitted to work only seven hours per day, one hour less than her co-workers without disabilities, while another received two additional days of annual leave.

3.2. Vulnerability

The participants highlighted their fear of voicing up for their needs in the workplace, which was driven by concerns of being as burdensome or incompetent. Many described feeling isolated and excluded from their colleagues. This reinforced a sense of marginalisation and diminished confidence.

3.2.1. Fear of Speaking Up

The study participants revealed their vulnerability and fear of speaking up for what they need and think in the workplace. When asked about why they did not request reasonable accommodations or voice their opinions, almost all the participants shared a common perspective on lack of acceptance, feelings of incompetence, and *being below the salt* (meaning lower power and social standing) within their organisation. Several participants said, "*Only when I perform well do I have the right to make demands*", (DN03), and "*I rarely express my opinion because I feel I'm not competent enough, so I can't express opinions*", (HN04). Thus, they indicated they tended to become accustomed to physical barriers without complaint or complied with every supervisor requirement without protest.

This self-silencing behaviour was linked to a fear of retribution and a profound internalisation of blame. The participants often attributed their struggles with new tasks to personal failings rather than the absence of adequate support, such as ongoing training from employers. One participant, for example, who did not receive any training after the probation period, and continued to face issues, stated the following:

> "*It's all my fault. When I worked slowly, or the quality was not good, it was very disheartening because I might spend 8–9 h, but the salary I received was only equivalent to what others worked in 4–5 h*."
>
> (HN03)

Moreover, the participants who were denied employment or were discriminated against in the workplace because of their disability hesitated to disclose their experiences even to close family and friends for fear of causing distress and embarrassment. One participant confessed the following:

> "*When I quit that organisation where I faced discrimination, I couldn't even cover my basic living costs, and I couldn't ask my family for support. I didn't dare to let my family know the true reason for quitting my job because it would only make them sadder and worry more. At that time, I was constantly crying*."
>
> (HCM05)

3.2.2. Feeling Disconnected, Excluded, and Isolated

The study participants highlighted a range of interactions with their managers and colleagues, which significantly impacted their feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Positive interactions where they felt valued and included fostered a sense of belonging and comfort conducive to learning and development. However, more commonly, the majority of the participants reported feelings of disconnect and being outsiders, particularly when a lack or complete absence of interaction and communication limited their engagement with colleagues. For example, one participant who worked on the first floor and was separated from all the co-workers without disabilities on the second floor expressed his frustration:

> "*I usually only see the leader during lunchtime, but never during work hours. This is because all the team leaders are seated on the second floor, and all communication is through Skype. No interaction with each other made me feel demotivated at work. It also gave me the feeling that my co-workers with disability and I on the first floor were like outsiders, which was very frustrating*."
>
> (DN04)

Another participant echoed a similar sentiment:

> "*I felt almost isolated. I only focused on my work. I am very active, dynamic, and open-minded, but when I started working there, I completely lost connection*."
>
> (HCM03)

Social activities further highlighted exclusionary practices, with several participants reporting not being invited while others felt neglected and excluded from attending. In some cases, event venues or activities failed to consider physical barriers that marginalised the participation of people with physical disabilities. These situations left many hesitating to join or choosing to skip such events even if they were invited. To illustrate, one participant recounted the following:

> "*I went on a teambuilding trip once and would never go again. Everyone was visiting places; young co-workers had a great time, but they forgot about me. No one supported me. People using wheelchairs could not go to the beach without support because of the sand. During the trip, I only stayed in my room*."
>
> (HN04)

Another participant had a similar experience, adding the following:

> "*On special occasions like 8 March, 20 October [Women's days], or the company's birthdays, they had parties or events. The entire company went to the party, but I was not invited*."
>
> (HN05)

These experiences highlight layers of exclusion and marginalisation that the participants faced, leading to decreased motivation and participation in social activities. Many participants opted to withdraw rather than face potential embarrassment or rejection.

3.3. Discrimination and Ableism

The pre-existing attitudes of colleagues and within organisations can present significant challenges for people with physical disabilities. The participants reported negative perceptions and discriminating attitudes from employers, supervisors, and colleagues. This theme is explored through two subthemes: attitudes from employers, and attitudes from supervisors and co-workers.

3.3.1. Attitudes from Employers

Regarding *the employers' attitudes*, the participants articulated both explicit and implicit forms of ableism and discrimination [58], stemming from pervasive prejudice, stigma, and negative stereotypes about their abilities linked to their disability. Many recounted experiences of direct rejection during job applications, even though roles did not require special workplace-related facilities for disability access, such as desk jobs or accounting positions. For example, participant HCM05 said, "*In one and a half months, I failed dozens of interviews, all for the same disability reason*." This discrimination extended to interview interactions, where the participants felt scrutinised for the lack of physical capabilities unrelated to job requirements. One participant described her interview experience as follows:

> "*During the interview, they [employers] looked at my arms and legs because they were unsure if I could use a computer or write with a pen. They wanted to make sure there were no limitations due to my disability affecting the job compared to normal people*."
>
> (HCM05)

These attitudes became more dismissive when the participants disclosed their disability. Participant HCM05, for instance, lost her job offer when she disclosed later in the interview that she has a disability. As with some other participants, she admitted that she did not reveal her disability in her CV, hoping for a fair chance to demonstrate her capabilities in the interview. However, this approach sometimes led to her being exposed to traumatic experiences. Reliving one such incident, she was in tears, describing the distress it caused:

> "*When I went in for an interview, they did not know I was a person with disability, so they offered me a job and told me to start next week. Then, I raised my hand and mentioned my disability. Immediately, they said this was a company, not a charity organisation hiring people with disability. They sent me home, and I did not get the job. They transferred me 300,000 VND (~20 AUD) for transportation. I cried non-stop, feeling really terrible*."
>
> (HCM05)

Discrimination also varied by the type of disability and qualification. The participants using wheelchairs reported more overt discrimination compared to people with mild physical disabilities. To illustrate, one participant explained, "*If they see you using a wheelchair, they may not even want to interview you. They ask questions beyond your area of expertise, which makes you feel discouraged and give up on the job*" (DN04). Additionally, the university graduates faced higher rates of rejection compared to the participants from vocational training centres, who received job-specific training aligned with companies recruiting people with disabilities. One participant, for instance, shared, "*[I am a] graduate from a big university with high distinction, everyone [society] complemented and admired what I did, but no one [employer] accepted [hired] me*" (HCM03). After dozens of rejections, most university graduates became doubtful of themselves and their qualifications.

Three participants, however, noted that disability organisations provided overly protective support instead of addressing their actual needs, which, while well intentioned, sometimes hindered their desire for independence and career advancement. The participants cited examples of unnecessary support such as the provision of a personal taxi for commuting, or personal assistance with entering the office, even when they were capable of performing these tasks independently. "*I felt like I was being stereotyped. Somehow, there was this notion that if you had a disability, then that's all you were. I felt uncomfortable and wanted to look for something new*", disclosed HCM06.

3.3.2. Attitudes from Supervisors and Co-Workers

Regarding *supervisors' and co-workers' attitudes*, the participants implied the significant impact of their supervisors' and co-workers' attitudes on their integration and career development within the workplace. Positive support, which fostered respect and recognition of capabilities, proved empowering and motivating for four study participants. They appreciated the tailored job tasks, assistance with physical barriers, belief in their competence, and growth opportunities afforded to them. This support affirmed their value as capable employees. For instance, one participant shared the following:

> "*My boss left me to discover the mistakes on my own, even though he already knew it was wrong from the beginning. . . But my boss allowed me to spend 1–2 months doing it and showed me where the mistake was. Because you only understand the issue if you have done it. Working here, I have the space to experience, make mistakes, learn, and grow*."
>
> (HCM06)

Conversely, ableist attitudes from colleagues and supervisors posed substantial barriers. Eleven participants detailed their experiences of discrimination in training, task assignments, and opportunities for advancement, which often left them feeling marginalised compared to employees without disabilities. Most of them reported the training was conducted "*for the sake of having it*" (DN04), with some receiving inadequate training and others receiving none at all. This lack of proper training led to them making mistakes at work and consequently, their abilities being unfairly evaluated. One participant expressed her frustration: "*While I was a newcomer, no one trained me on handling customer complaints. When I asked, they said something very difficult to understand, then talked amongst themselves, [I heard them say] 'I told her, but she didn't understand*", (HCM02).

The participants also experienced differential treatment in the workplace. When something went wrong, instead of having the opportunity to explain or receive support and guidance, a few participants experienced being scolded and blamed, which was not reported as the same for staff without disabilities. This made them feel humiliated and led to two participants' decision to quit their jobs. Moreover, there were instances where co-workers without disabilities, even those with less experience, were given preferential treatment in task assignments and promotions:

> "*I also don't understand what they [supervisors] were thinking when it came to training for data editing work; the two male colleagues [without disability] would be trained more than me. So, when working, the knowledge that I wasn't trained in, I didn't know. Every time I had to do it, I had to ask, but asking a lot makes people dislike it. They judged me as not knowing how to do the job*."
>
> (DN02)

Furthermore, the majority of the participants also felt that their contributions were undervalued and their suggestions for improving workflows were ignored:

> "*The way I learned in the vocational training centre was quicker and more productive than at the company I'm currently working for. So, I made suggestions that were ignored. It's sad, indeed*."
>
> (DN04)

The distrust and discrimination led nearly all the participants to feel compelled to significantly outperform their counterparts without disabilities to gain acceptance and recognition. Notably, when asked about their desire to benefit from policies supporting people with disabilities at work, many participants expressed their grave concerns about the potential negativity of such policies. They feared these might inadvertently lead to isolation or resentment from colleagues without disabilities and potentially limit employment opportunities due to the perceived high costs of accommodation. The participants did not want to be treated differently. To illustrate, a participant recounted her experience as follows:

> "*Because both people with and without disability work together, if people with disability receive much special treatment, staff without disability might resent it. Then, people with disability would feel isolated and difficult to integrate*."
>
> (HCM03)

4. Discussion

This study delves into the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam to identify ways to improve employment conditions and promote workplace equality. The results from this study reveal a range of accessibility issues, negative attitudes, and discrimination toward employees with physical disabilities. The majority of the participants had received minimal support in areas such as training, career development, and social connections. By applying Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [47] to the findings, multi-system factors can be identified that influence the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam (see Figure 1).

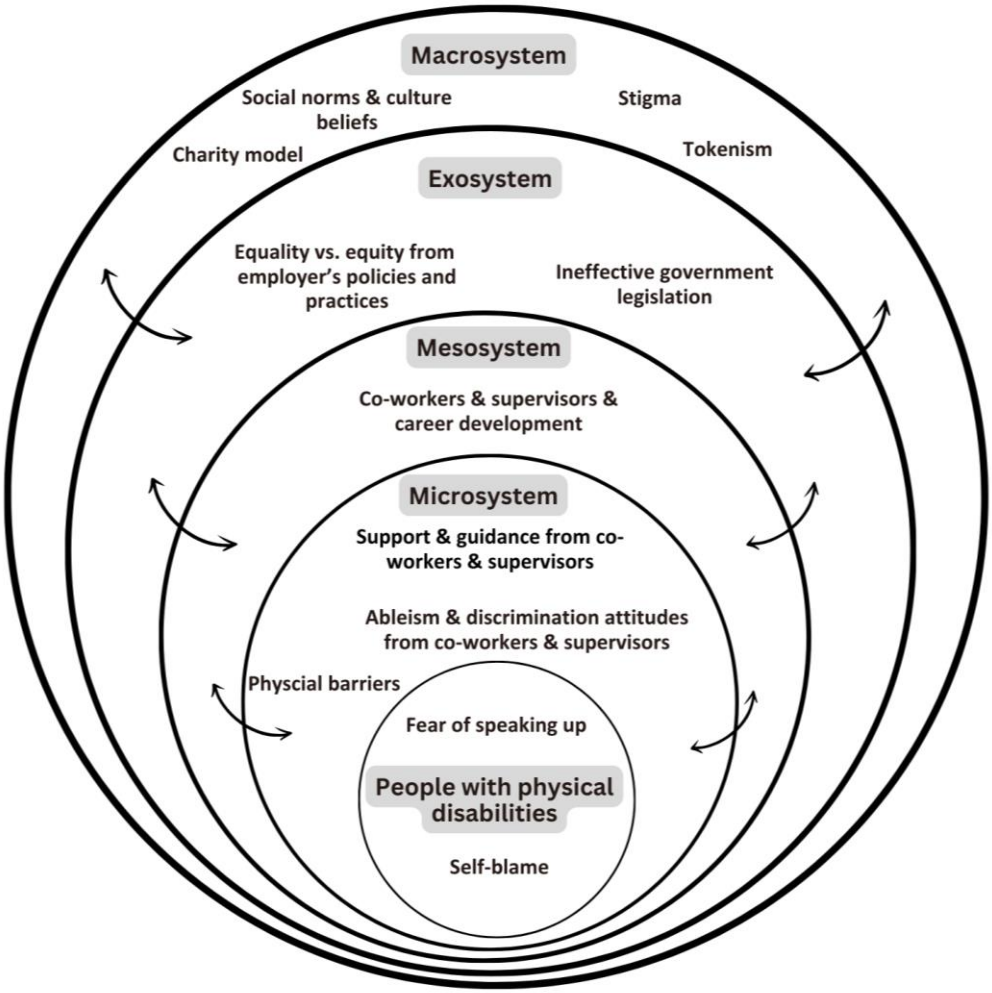

Figure 1. Ecological systems model of the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam. Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner [47] (p. 25).

4.1. Individual Level

A fear of speaking up due to ableism and discrimination leads people with physical disabilities to hesitate to express their needs or report mistreatment. This issue reflects inadequate awareness among people with disabilities regarding their rights to a safe and accommodating work environment, as noted by Lindsay et al. [59]. Moreover, the internalisation of blame, where the participants attributed difficulties with new tasks to personal failings rather than inadequate support, exacerbates this reluctance. Unsupportive environments lead employees with disabilities to internalise their failures and defer to authority rather than voice concerns [60]. This behaviour could be affected by the Vietnamese cultural context, which is often characterised by a top-down management style, which restricts people in lower hierarchical positions from voicing concerns [61]. This hierarchical culture contrasts sharply with an adaptive approach, which prioritises inclusivity and open communication [62].

4.2. Microsystem

Influences at the microsystem level involve the quality interactions between employees with physical disabilities, co-workers, and supervisors. Support and guidance from co-workers and supervisors helped the participants affirm their capabilities and foster a sense of belonging within the workplace culture. This finding is echoed by Hsu et al. [63] and Lindsay et al. [59] who identified that the effect of good relations with colleagues enables employees with disabilities to thrive. However, many participants also reported

encountering discriminatory attitudes and behaviours from co-workers and supervisors, leading to feelings of exclusion. Negative interactions, characterised by 'othering', ableism, and devaluation, hindered their integration and connection with colleagues and affected the wellbeing and job performance of employees with disabilities [43,64], causing some participants to leave their jobs. This dichotomy between supportive and discriminatory workplace dynamics underscores the complexity of achieving true inclusion and the need for targeted interventions to address negative attitudes.

Physical barriers within the immediate work environment further hindered job performance and social integration for the participants. While some employers in this study attempted to address accessibility, their efforts were often superficial, focusing only on some features such as ramps while applying little attention to other critical needs such as accessible workspaces and cafeteria areas. The participants perceived these temporary solutions as "special privileges" to "fix" the issues rather than standard accommodations that should align with the policies on reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities that were issued by the Ministry of Construction in 2014 [65]. Financial concerns were commonly cited for inadequate accessibility measures by the participants. However, previous research suggested that the costs of making workplaces accessible were comparable to standard workplace adaptations for employees without disabilities [66]. These findings reflect a misunderstanding of comprehensive accessibility and highlight the need for employers to adopt more holistic and permanent solutions, as critiqued by Boman et al. [67].

4.3. Mesosystem

The mesosystem is strongly connected to interactions across components in the microsystem. The mesosystem relates to the professional growth and career advancement of people with physical disabilities through the dynamics of interactions with supervisors and co-workers [68]. In some cases, the participants were empowered by colleagues through new job tasks and challenges that further facilitated the development of career ambitions, such as studying abroad. This supportive environment allowed the employees with physical disabilities to effectively utilise their skills and strengths, fostering professional growth and personal satisfaction [64]. Conversely, the absence of such supportive interactions often resulted in stagnant career paths. Many participants reported they were unable to advance in their jobs despite years of service in the same position, which led to feelings of uselessness and being undervalued. These findings highlight the multifaceted benefits of employment for people with physical disabilities, underscoring the need for inclusive employment initiatives.

4.4. Exosystem

Exosystem influences include the broader contextual factors that indirectly influence individual experiences. Significant barriers were identified in employer policies and practices and government legislation, all of which affect the employment prospects of people with physical disabilities. The participants reported that the employment policies that applied to them were the same as for other employees without disabilities, such as identical work hours, sick leave entitlements, KPIs, and development opportunities. However, these "equal" policies often led to inequitable outcomes and disadvantages or even forced people who had weaker health conditions or faced more challenges than employees without disabilities to quit their jobs. These practices contradict the Labour Code [18] and reflect a common misconception among employers who may mistakenly equate equality with equity in which they refer to providing the same resources or opportunities to all employees (equality) rather than tailoring them to address the specific needs of employees with

disabilities (equity) [69], thereby ensuring fair outcomes. As Shore et al. [33] argued, true inclusion requires moving beyond equal treatment to equitable treatment, ensuring that workplace practices and policies are adapted to meet diverse needs fairly and effectively.

Moreover, the ineffective dissemination and implementation of government regulations intended to support people with disabilities in the workplace further exacerbate these issues [1]. Most participants were unaware of these regulations and the relevant laws governing their employment, and almost all reported receiving no governmental support in obtaining jobs or receiving accessible workplace accommodations. The ineffective implementation of these laws not only reflects systemic failures but also perpetuates distrust and reluctance among people with disabilities to seek support from government authorities regarding the LDP, echoing the concerns highlighted by Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall [70].

4.5. Macrosystem

Broader societal and cultural factors can influence at the macrosystem level. Societal norms and attitudes in Vietnam's culture and society significantly influence the experiences of people with disabilities at work. As stated often in the literature (e.g., [22]), deep-seated misconceptions and stigma from the medical model of disability often cast people with disabilities as dependent and less capable, leading to discriminatory hiring practices and tokenism. Over half of the participants experienced job rejections in application rounds, job offer withdrawals after disclosing their disability, or employers who wanted to recruit people with mild disability rather than job applicants with more severe or multiple disabilities, for example, people who use a wheelchair. These practices by some employers of hiring employees with disabilities may be motivated by their need to meet diversity quotas, for instance, 30% of employees with disabilities to apply for tax deductions from the government, or enhance their public image, rather than recognising the actual capabilities and rights of people with disabilities [71,72].

Furthermore, the influence of global North political and economic factors also play a role in shaping these experiences. International frameworks and pressures, such as those from the United Nations, UNCRPD, or multinational corporations, promote diversity and inclusion policies, which can influence local practice in Vietnam. However, some participants felt that public sector employers viewed hiring people with disabilities as a form of corporate social responsibility rather than valuing their contributions or wanting to involve them in the organisation's development. This tokenistic approach, described by Friedman et al. [58], results in superficial inclusion and does little to challenge or rectify underlying discrimination in Vietnam against employees with disabilities. Consequently, the impacts of these external influences often manifest in Vietnam as shallow inclusion efforts that fail to challenge or dismantle the underlying discrimination practices within the workplace.

In summary, understanding cultural and community norms, alongside other elements of the ecological system, is important when supporting people with physical disabilities in overcoming employment challenges [47]. Creating workplace inclusion requires connections among all the levels in this system (shown as arrows in Figure 1). The results of this study underscore the significance of support and incentives from supervisors, co-workers, and employers in fostering a work environment where all the employees feel welcome and valued to work, learn, and thrive [43,70].

4.6. Recommendations

These recommendations require the active participation of policymakers, employers, managers, co-workers, and people with disabilities themselves. To ensure active participation in the workplace, people with physical disabilities should confidently voice their

needs and advocate for their rights through their involvement in labour unions in their organisations, which play a crucial role in advocating and implementing workers' rights in Vietnam. By joining the Labour Union, people with disabilities gain a platform to contribute their perspectives and insights. This ensures that their unique experiences are considered in the development of workplace policies and social welfare initiatives. This participatory approach not only increases their presence but also raises awareness of the specific needs and challenges they face, which promotes greater inclusion and equality in the workplace. This also involves equipping themselves with the knowledge of employment rights and employer obligations while engaging with disability advocacy groups and NGOs for additional support.

Rather than focusing on the traditional supply-side models that address the rehabilitation of people with disabilities, organisations should prioritise implanting demand-side employment strategies such as fostering corporate culture, improving accessibility, and building robust support systems [73]. This includes implementing regular disability awareness training, strict anti-discrimination policies, and equitable practices that offer reasonable accommodations and adaptations to tailor to the specific needs of employees with disabilities. Employers should apply comprehensive accessibility solutions based on national regulations regarding the design of accessible buildings and facilities for people with disabilities [65]. Additionally, organisations should establish mentorship programmes and structured onboarding processes such as buddy teams with members who have many working experiences to provide ongoing support and train employees with disabilities at work [74]. Encouraging open communication about sensitive issues and involving people with disabilities in workplace solutions and decision making are crucial for fostering a corporate culture that values cooperation and respects diversity [75].

The Vietnam government and policymakers should increase disability awareness, enhance protection legislation, improve policy implementation and accountability, and provide more infrastructure and support. The government should design and support disability awareness programmes for employers and the wider community, addressing negative perceptions through education and training on disability, respectful and inclusive language, etiquette, and legal rights. Additionally, government agencies and NCCD need to align national disability legislation with UNCRPD principles and establish monitoring mechanisms to assess implementation and impact. Involving NGOs and businesses in the design and evaluation processes will ensure accountability and inclusion [22].

By focusing on these recommendations, Vietnam can develop a more inclusive and supportive employment environment for people with physical disabilities, promoting integration and success in the workplace.

4.7. Limitations

Although this study has provided new information about the employment experiences of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam, it has several limitations. The samples were drawn from three major cities in Vietnam, which may not reflect employment barriers in other parts of the country, particularly the rural areas where people with physical disabilities may face different disadvantages. The small sample size and intentional focus on people with physical disabilities in the three major cities thus limit the generalisability of the findings to other locations and sectors of the population. Additionally, four participants with short stature faced fewer physical barriers to others due to the nature of their disability, potentially influencing the results. The study did not include perspectives from employers, co-workers, or supervisors, which may have provided additional insights but were beyond the scope of the research.

5. Conclusions

Overall, this study appears to be the first to directly capture the perspectives of people with physical disabilities in Vietnam, exploring their experiences of seeking, maintaining, and changing employment and the support they receive in the workplace. The findings reveal that people with physical disabilities face significant challenges, including discriminatory attitudes, inadequate accommodations, and a lack of work, social, and legal support. The participants highlighted the importance of inclusive workplace cultures, flexible policies, and positive interaction with supervisors and co-workers in aiding their career development, job satisfaction, and sense of belonging. Understanding these experiences underscores the need for targeted policy and practice interventions by both government and organisations to address these barriers, ensuring that people with physical disabilities can achieve sustainable and fulfilling employment outcomes. This research emphasises the necessity of fostering inclusive workplaces and engaging stakeholders in developing and implementing effective strategies to enhance employment opportunities and workplace integration where

> "*Regardless of disability and movement difficulty, people with disability can stand shoulder to shoulder with people without disability*."
>
> (HCM01)

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