

BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL
ARTS

**The Politics of (In)Visibility: Disability, Employment, and Social Justice in
Slovakia within the EU Framework**

BACHELOR THESIS

Simona Jad'ud'ová

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this bachelor thesis is the work of my own and has not been published in part or in whole elsewhere. Since I am not a native speaker, I used AI powered tools to correct my grammar and helped me with the translation as well. I also used Grammarly to refine my ideas and improve the clarity of the paper. All used literature is attributed and cited in the references.

In Bratislava, February 14, 2025

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Abstract

This thesis explores how society perceives people with disabilities and what factors influence their sense of dignity and usefulness. It examines the extent to which public policies, employment opportunities, and social security contribute to their genuine inclusion in society—or, conversely, reinforce their isolation. The research focuses on why many people with disabilities still do not feel like fully recognized members of society, despite the existence of various support measures. It draws from Nancy Fraser's theories of social justice and Erving Goffman's concept of stigma, while also analyzing how legislation, media narratives, and public discourse shape the social status of people with disabilities.

The aim is to show that a person's dignity can be closely tied to their sense of financial independence, as economic stability allows them to achieve self-realization, build their place in society, and actively participate in it. Employment and the ability to earn a living not only reduce the risk of social exclusion but also enable individuals to live with dignity, without being entirely dependent on state support or family assistance. This research is based on an analysis of strategic policy documents, statistical data, and public discourse in Slovakia. The findings indicate that one of the biggest challenges is not just access to the labor market but also the persistence of stereotypes and a lack of understanding of why building an inclusive society is essential. Therefore, education and awareness-raising efforts should not be directed only at employers and institutions but also at the broader public, which needs to recognize that diversity benefits everyone.

Keywords: dignity, inclusion, disability, social justice, stigma, public policy

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Abstrakt

Táto práca sa zaoberá tým, ako spoločnosť vníma osoby so zdravotným postihnutím a aké faktory ovplyvňujú ich pocit dôstojnosti a užitočnosti. Skúma, do akej miery verejná politika, zamestnanosť a sociálne zabezpečenie prispievajú k ich skutočnému začleneniu do spoločnosti alebo naopak posilňujú ich izoláciu. Výskum sa zameriava na to, prečo sa mnohí ľudia so zdravotným postihnutím stále necítia ako plnohodnotní členovia spoločnosti, hoci existujú rôzne opatrenia na ich podporu. Práca vychádza z teórií Nancy Fraser o sociálnej spravodlivosti a Ervinga Goffmana o stigmatizácii, pričom skúma aj to, ako legislatíva, médiá a verejná diskusia ovplyvňujú postavenie osôb so zdravotným postihnutím. Cieľom je ukázať, že dôstojnosť človeka môže závisieť napríklad aj od pocitu finančnej nezávislosti, keďže ekonomická stabilita mu umožňuje dosiahnuť sebarealizáciu, budovať si vlastné postavenie v spoločnosti a aktívne sa na nej podieľať. Zamestnanie a možnosť ekonomickej samostatnosti zároveň znižujú riziko sociálneho vylúčenia a umožňujú jednotlivcovi žiť dôstojný život bez úplnej závislosti od štátnej podpory či rodiny. Výskum vychádza z analýzy strategických dokumentov, štatistických údajov a verejného diskurzu na Slovensku. Zistenia ukazujú, že jedným z najväčších problémov nie je len prístup na trh práce, ale aj pretrvávajúce stereotypy a nepochopenie toho, prečo je dôležité budovať inkluzívnu spoločnosť. Preto je potrebné, aby sa vzdelávanie a osveta nezameriavali len na zamestnávateľov a inštitúcie, ale aj na širokú verejnosť, ktorá musí pochopiť, že rozmanitosť prospieva všetkým.

Kľúčové slová: dôstojnosť, inklúzia, zdravotné postihnutie, sociálna spravodlivosť, stigma, verejná politika

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Introduction

Dignity, equality, and participation are fundamental human rights, yet people with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers that restrict their full inclusion in society. While progress has been made through international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and national policies, individuals with disabilities still experience limited access to education, employment, and social engagement due to persistent stereotypes and structural inequalities. Their exclusion is not merely an economic issue but a broader question of human rights, social justice, and democratic participation.

Work can be considered one of the essential elements of full participation in a democratic society, serving as a bridge between public and social life and creating a space for individuals to assert their needs, contribute to their communities, and exercise their civil rights. Its psychological significance extends beyond financial stability, influencing intellectual, emotional, and personal development (Fedáková & Spoločenskovedný ústav SAV, 2003). However, the inclusion of people with disabilities must go beyond employment. Their ability to participate in the workforce is closely tied to education, access to support systems, and the broader fight against poverty and exclusion. Thus, employment is not just an economic matter but also a question of participation and the maintenance of a democratic society.

As of today, the European Union, according to statistics from the European Commission, has over 87 million registered individuals with disabilities, while Slovakia reports approximately 850,000 citizens with some impairments. However, according to Ján Riapoš (2023), the president of the Paralympic Committee, the number of people with disabilities continues to rise: *"The number of people with disabilities is increasing, not decreasing. It used to be 12.5%, but today it is as high as 15%."* (Riapoš, 2023). This trend highlights the growing need for inclusive policies and opportunities for people with disabilities. In an ideal democratic system, the labor market should operate based on fair competition, allowing everyone to thrive according to their abilities. And yet, according to the *European Human Rights Report* (2023), only 51.3% of persons with disabilities in the EU are employed, compared to 75.6% of those without disabilities. The report also highlights that women with disabilities have an even lower employment rate of 49%, while young individuals with disabilities aged 20 to 29 have an employment rate of only 47.4% (*European Human Rights Report, 2023*). Despite

the existence of anti-discrimination directives and legislation across all areas of life, many people with disabilities continue to encounter systemic barriers and remain vulnerable to multiple forms of discrimination, as this study will further explore. This concept is rooted in the idea that individuals can be marginalized due to intersecting characteristics, ultimately pushing them to the periphery of societal concerns.

A 2019 European Union survey shows that people with disabilities not only face social exclusion but are also disproportionately affected by poverty—28.4% of individuals with disabilities are at risk of poverty, compared to 18.4% of those without disabilities. Additionally, over 47% of persons with disabilities in the EU struggle to pay their bills (More Than a Quarter of EU Citizens with Disabilities Struggle to Make Ends Meet, n.d.). This issue is widespread across several European Union countries, though the extent varies significantly among them.

The stigma surrounding disability plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes and social structures. Negative stereotypes, often formed without real understanding, reinforce prejudice and exclusion. One of the defining characteristics of stereotypes is their irrational nature, making them resistant to facts or well-supported arguments. A common misconception is that people with disabilities are inherently dependent on others and incapable of living independently, which further restricts their autonomy. However, research shows that empowering individuals through education, accessibility, and inclusive policies fosters independence, dignity, and self-determination. Providing meaningful opportunities, including employment, for people with disabilities not only enhances their economic security but also strengthens social cohesion and challenges societal biases.

This thesis does not focus solely on employment but rather examines how policies, education, social attitudes, and accessibility shape the inclusion of people with disabilities. From a political science and social perspective, employment is not just about economic participation—it is a means of self-recognition. Fundamentally, the issue at stake is equality, acceptance, participation, and the protection of human rights. This study explores the implementation of disability rights in Slovakia, analyzing the gap between policy and practice while considering how public perception, education, and accessibility contribute to a more inclusive society. Ultimately, fostering a diverse and equitable environment benefits not only people with disabilities but also strengthens democracy and social cohesion as a whole.

1. Defining Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms the right of every individual to work, receive an education, and take part in public life without discrimination. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) further reinforces the responsibility of states to remove barriers that prevent full participation in these spheres. Yet, in reality, people with disabilities still face structural inequalities, social prejudices, and limited access to opportunities, which often leave them marginalized in both economic and social life. Education plays a particularly crucial role—not only as a preparation for work but as a means of self-development, confidence-building, and civic engagement (UNESCO, 2016).. Without inclusive education, individuals with disabilities are often denied the tools they need to shape their own futures. Likewise, participation in society is not limited to employment; it includes the ability to be part of a community, to engage in cultural and political life, and to be recognized as an equal.

To fully understand these challenges, it is essential to look beyond economic inequalities and consider the social and cultural structures that shape exclusion. Nancy Fraser's theory of justice offers a lens through which to examine both the material disadvantages that prevent equal participation and the deeper societal misrecognition that reinforces them. At the same time, Erving Goffman's work on stigma helps explain how deeply ingrained biases influence how people with disabilities are perceived and treated in education, employment, and public life. Together, these perspectives provide a deeper understanding of why exclusion persists and how justice must be both economic and social.

1.1 Nancy Fraser: Redistributive and Recognition Justice

Nancy Fraser is a philosopher from the United States, a critical theorist, and a professor in the fields of political science and social studies who has addressed a broad spectrum of topics. Nevertheless, she is predominantly recognized for her contributions to philosophical ideas about justice and injustice. One of her most renowned concepts is tied to social justice, addressing the need to understand inequality and the marginalization of various groups.

Her work is divided into three dimensions, but in this chapter, we will primarily focus on the first two—economic (redistributive) and cultural justice—because they are closely interconnected, offering insights into how economic and cultural barriers affect individuals' lives. In our case, this concerns how people with disabilities face inequalities in the labor

market and in accessing social participation. The third dimension, political representation, is equally important as it addresses the exclusion of certain groups from political rights and decision-making processes. Inclusive democracy, according to Nancy Fraser, is the foundation for creating a space where every voice is considered and respected.

1.1.1 Redistributive Justice

Redistributive justice, or economic justice, deals with social inequalities, focusing on class differences and the uneven distribution of resources among groups. Fraser's understanding of redistribution is centered on eliminating social inequalities through a fairer allocation of resources, whether in terms of wealth or opportunities. She argues that the uneven distribution of resources creates issues like poverty, exploitation, and deprivation experienced by certain population groups. This often stems from a lack of access to resources such as education, finances, or opportunities.

In the context of people with disabilities seeking employment in the open labor market, this primarily relates to a lack of access to opportunities or appropriate jobs based on their actual capabilities. Fraser emphasizes that people with disabilities not only face barriers to income, but they are often excluded from educational opportunities that would allow them to enter the workforce in the first place. Furthermore, Fraser was concerned about issues related to unfair wages, working conditions, or the availability of supportive structures, which individuals with disabilities may still experience today. Beyond employment, redistributive justice also extends to ensuring access to other social goods such as housing, healthcare, and education. For instance, inadequate educational systems and lack of healthcare tailored to the specific needs of people with disabilities limit their ability to develop skills and participate in the workforce. Housing policies may fail to provide accessible living spaces, and people with disabilities may also face higher medical costs due to lack of adequate insurance coverage. By addressing these social inequalities, redistributive justice aims to provide a fairer distribution of resources, ensuring that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as others to lead fulfilling lives, both within and outside of the labor market.

Fraser advocates for resource redistribution and solutions aimed at restructuring the economic sphere to enable fairer distribution and eliminate systemic obstacles to equality. This includes not only legislative changes supporting people with disabilities, such as policies promoting equal access to education and healthcare, but also government incentives for employers to

hire and retain people with disabilities. Investments in making workplaces accessible, including providing necessary assistive technologies and adaptive work environments, are crucial for enabling people with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

1.1.2 Cultural Justice

The second dimension of social justice, as proposed by Fraser, is cultural justice, also referred to as the justice of recognition. This involves creating a space for understanding and respecting the identities and cultural values of various groups, especially marginalized ones. It addresses inequality based on race, gender identity, nationality, sexual orientation, or disabilities that individuals might face. Such inequalities often lead to social exclusion due to stigma or devaluation, which, in a modern democratic system, should not exist.

Fraser (1998) critiques approaches by Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, who view recognition as a matter of self-realization. In contrast, Fraser sees recognition as a matter of justice. She argues that it is unjust for some individuals and groups to be denied full status as partners in social interaction due to institutionalized cultural patterns that devalue their inherent traits or assigned characteristics. This devaluation perpetuates stereotypes that not only limit economic opportunities but also undermine their dignity and participation in social life.

For instance, people with disabilities often suffer from societal perceptions that see them as passive recipients of benefits and support, unable to fully participate in society. This narrative, perpetuated over centuries, still persists, creating stereotypes and assumptions about lower capability or lesser value. Such stigmatization impacts their ability to gain access to both economic opportunities and a meaningful place in society. Stigma can limit opportunities for employment, education, and social engagement, further entrenching their exclusion.

1.1.3 The Interconnection of Redistribution and Recognition

Redistribution and recognition, according to Fraser, are deeply interconnected, and separating these dimensions from each other would be counterproductive because they collectively form a unified whole of social justice. Fraser calls this approach the "perspective of participatory parity," grounded in the principle of human rights regarding equality and the opportunity for

all members of society to participate fully in various spheres, including economic, social, and political life.

While addressing economic injustice brings substantial benefits, Fraser warns that without addressing cultural injustice, solutions can often be superficial and fail to break down barriers or stereotypes. For example, implementing quotas for employing people with disabilities may ensure a degree of economic inclusion, but without changing societal attitudes, their position in the labor market remains weak and vulnerable. Redistribution and recognition are therefore two sides of the same coin: economic injustice may be exacerbated by cultural marginalization, and vice versa, cultural injustice may be linked to economic inequality (Mladenov, T. 2016).

1.1.4 Political Representation and Global Justice

Fraser's theory also touches on the importance of political representation, which is especially relevant when we think about the exclusion of marginalized groups, like people with disabilities, from political processes. Fraser (1998) argues that an inclusive democracy is essential for ensuring that every voice is heard and valued in decision-making. Unfortunately, people with disabilities often face exclusion from these spaces—whether that's not being properly represented in legislative bodies or having policies made about them without their input. This exclusion is a form of political injustice, as it denies disabled individuals the opportunity to influence the laws and decisions that directly affect their lives.

On a larger scale, Fraser calls for comprehensive strategies at both national and international levels to address inequalities more broadly. Issues such as migration, inequality, and violence affect people with disabilities in ways that transcend borders. For example, people with disabilities are often left behind when it comes to access to healthcare, education, or even basic infrastructure in many countries. Fraser's point here is that to effectively tackle these global challenges, there is a need for transnational institutions and global policies that prioritize equality and inclusivity for everyone, regardless of ability. The *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* is a prime example of this global approach, ensuring that disability rights are protected and promoted worldwide.

Fraser's theory, when applied to the issue of disability, shows how these concerns fit into a broader conversation about justice, equality, and representation. It highlights the importance of removing barriers to participation, not just at the national level but also in global decision-

making. In the end, ensuring that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of political life—locally, nationally, and internationally—is key to creating a fairer and more just society.

1.2 Erving Goffman: Stigmatization and Social Exclusion

In his 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman, draws from Nancy Fraser's theory strongly connected to the stigma phenomenon. He writes about the way stigma, even unwittingly, determines many aspects of the lives of the people who "carry it on their shoulder" (Goffman, 1963). Even when the talent and capabilities of the affected talent (or prospective talent) meet the demands of social and market conditions, stigma often narrows participation in the social dimensions of society, the labor market, and even within families, just due to their differences that do not meet with the regularity.

1.2.1 Types of Stigma and Their Implications for Social Inclusion

Erving Goffman's seminal work on stigma categorizes it into three primary types, each representing different sources of social marginalization and exclusion. The first type, physical deformities, refers to visible physical disabilities or health conditions, which immediately draw attention and often lead to negative judgments. These visible signs of difference make it easy for others to categorize individuals, often reducing them to their physical appearance, regardless of their capabilities. The second type, character flaws, refers to perceived deviations from societal norms, such as mental illness, addiction, or a criminal record. These types of stigma are not as immediately visible but are often even more deeply ingrained in societal attitudes, leading to exclusion from social, professional, and economic opportunities. The third type, tribal stigma, pertains to collective stigma tied to the membership of certain groups, such as race, religion, or ethnicity. This form of stigma is associated with larger societal prejudices and the way entire groups are dehumanized or marginalized based on their identity, often regardless of the individual's personal characteristics or actions.

Goffman's understanding of stigma is rooted in the idea that stigma is a social construct. Rather than being an inherent characteristic of the individual, stigma arises through the interactions between individuals and society. It is in the reactions of others, the labeling and stereotyping, that stigma is born. Goffman argues that it is not an immutable trait of a person but a label imposed by society that marginalizes those who are deemed different. This social

process deeply affects individuals' experiences and their ability to participate in society, particularly in areas such as employment, education, and social interactions.

1.2.2 The Impact of Stigma on Labor Market Inclusion, Education, and Social Participation

The impact of stigma extends far beyond just the labor market—it permeates every aspect of life for those affected. Goffman's work highlights that stigma is not just an abstract concept; it has tangible consequences on the mental, social, and educational functioning of individuals. People who are stigmatized often experience feelings of anger, shame, and low self-esteem. These emotions can lead to withdrawal, anxiety, and social exclusion (Chaudoir, S. R., Earnshaw, V. A., & Andel, S. 2013). The stigma surrounding them can also cause them to internalize negative societal views, contributing to a diminished sense of self-worth and, ultimately, a lack of confidence in their ability to participate fully in society. The fear of being judged, or the anxiety about how one is perceived, can severely limit a person's opportunities to lead a fulfilling life, whether in social settings, in education, or in the workplace.

Goffman (1963) identified two primary reactions that individuals face when they are stigmatized. The first is discreditation, which occurs when the stigma is visible and obvious, such as with a physical disability. In these cases, the individual's difference is immediately apparent, and they are often treated according to societal assumptions about their abilities or limitations. The second reaction is discredibility, which occurs when the stigma is not immediately apparent but can be revealed over time, such as in the case of mental illness or addiction. Here, the individual's hidden condition becomes a point of vulnerability, and their potential for exclusion is tied to whether or not others discover it.

In the context of social inclusion, these stigmatizing experiences often manifest in the form of social exclusion, not just in employment but also in educational opportunities, civic participation, and legal protections. People with mental health conditions, disabilities, or other stigmatized attributes may be excluded from community life or education, regardless of their potential. Stigma prevents them from accessing the tools necessary to succeed in the workforce and limits their capacity to contribute meaningfully to society. Stigmatized individuals, especially those with disabilities, often face barriers to accessing quality education that would allow them to develop skills needed for gainful employment (Waqas, A.,

Malik, S., Fida, A., Abbas, N., Mian, N., Miryala, S., Amray, A. N., Shah, Z., & Naveed, S. 2020). Social stigma in education can create environments where they feel undervalued, limiting their chances for personal growth and success.

In the labor market, employers often associate stigmatized individuals with stereotypes such as low productivity or the need for excessive workplace adjustments. For example, people with disabilities are often wrongly assumed to be less productive, requiring special accommodations that many employers view as costly or difficult to implement. These assumptions create barriers to entry in the labor market, making it difficult for stigmatized individuals to secure employment or to advance in their careers.

In education, stigmatization can lead to a lack of access to adequate learning environments, severely limiting an individual's future employment opportunities. For instance, children with learning disabilities or mental health issues may be segregated from mainstream classrooms, which leads to reduced educational attainment. In turn, this makes it harder for them to compete for jobs, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. The same stigma that limits employment opportunities also shapes their education, reinforcing a cycle that makes it even harder to escape marginalization.

2. Disability Through History

2.1 Early Perceptions of Disability

Just as in the past, individuals with disabilities are essential and valued members of our society. While representing a minority, they must have the right to enjoy the same privileges as the majority, as outlined by human rights agreements. Nonetheless, this has not always been the case and still is not, which can be observed throughout history. History reveals that perceptions of disabled individuals, from the Roman Empire to the 20th century, remained relatively unchanged. Discrimination and obstacles to economic participation have existed throughout history in various forms, and some of these issues are still relevant today.

The Greeks were known for their pursuit of human perfection. They believed that beauty and intelligence were interconnected, and any imperfection—similar to the Romans—was rationalized. The Romans viewed disabled fellow citizens as inferior. Latin didn't even have a term for "disabled"; instead, they used the word "monstrum," the same term also used for mythical monsters. Disability itself was seen as divine punishment, inflicted upon those who bore it. When a disabled child was born, it was up to the father to decide the child's fate, which often resulted in a death sentence, which was socially accepted at the time, meaning that those people did not even have a chance to grow up and participate equally

With the fall of the Roman Empire, Christianity began to rise in prominence, bringing with it a brief period of compassion and pity for individuals with disabilities. However, this compassion was soon overshadowed by fear. The Middle Ages, marked by the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, was a period well known for the migration of peoples, overseas discoveries, and religious reformation. However, at the same time, it was known for social oppression, economic decline, and intellectual stagnation. As Shreve (1982) noted, society became increasingly fearful of people with disabilities, associating them with supernatural forces. Similar to Greek and Roman perceptions, disability was often seen as a devilish affliction or divine punishment for sins. Metzler (2013) further emphasizes that during the medieval period, these beliefs reinforced exclusion and institutionalization as they were seen as suffering divine punishment for their sins.

Tragically, individuals influenced by these beliefs were ostracized, forced to live outside of society under harsh conditions, begging for mere scraps. Although institutions existed, the conditions were far from humane, with no aim of treatment—only to hide the disabled from public view.

Although there was some care for the disabled, they were still excluded from working, earning a living, or contributing to society in meaningful ways. Their lack of access to stable income pushed them further into poverty, leaving them dependent on the charity of others for survival. As their numbers grew, societies began viewing them as a growing societal concern rather than individuals in need of inclusion. The increasing visibility of people with disabilities, especially those living in poverty, led to the establishment of public institutions such as poorhouses and almshouses, which were designed to remove them from public life rather than provide real opportunities for integration. These institutions, while publicly funded, reinforced the belief that disability was something to be managed separately from the rest of society.

The Renaissance brought some changes, particularly in attitudes within these institutions, which began to emphasize healthcare and hospitalization. Religious influence also shaped this care, as monks and other religious figures often took responsibility; however, individuals with some special needs, even under their roofs, suffered from jokes at their expense. “People with disabilities were ridiculed, such as a court jester who was actually someone with a humped back” (Shreve, M. 1982). Unfortunately, mockery remains a prevalent issue in contemporary society, with people with disabilities continuing to experience ridicule. Even those who are actively working to improve societal functioning, despite their efforts and motivation, are still subjected to this form of bullying. A notable example is the case of an opposition politician with a visible disability, who has experienced mockery despite her work in the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

2.2 Institutionalization and Industrial Exclusion

By the 18th century, these attitudes became even more rigid with the rise of the Industrial Revolution and new scientific advancements. This shift from manual labor to capitalist factories played a pivotal role in shaping society. Even when they could contribute to society in limited ways, the pressures of industrialization and the capitalist economy effectively excluded them from meaningful participation. The rise of mass production and the demand

for efficiency left little room for disabled individuals, whose abilities were considered insufficient to meet the growing demands of capitalist machinery. The concept of labor shifted toward maximum productivity, and as Longmore & Umansky (2001) argue, industrial capitalism reinforced the belief that disabled individuals were economically unfit, leading to their confinement in institutions rather than integration into the workforce.

The growing population of disabled individuals highlighted an even more pressing societal issue, leading to the establishment of more poorhouses and almshouses. While initially created as shelters, these institutions became spaces of confinement rather than inclusion. The dominant medical model of disability, which viewed disability as something that needed to be fixed, further reinforced the idea that disabled individuals should be separated from society. This strengthened policies that prioritized institutionalization over meaningful opportunities for participation, much like what had occurred during the Medieval ages.

The French Revolution and the Declaration of Independence in the USA were key turning points in history, contributing to the emancipation of the working classes and the rise of new social structures. These movements defined a new form of freedom, centered on individual rights and political liberty. However, as industrial capitalism developed, a new group emerged: people with disabilities. Although new rights were being granted to other marginalized groups, disabled individuals continued to be left out of these discussions, as they were still viewed primarily through the lens of economic productivity.

These individuals, whose physical and mental conditions deviated from societal norms, faced exclusion because of the belief that they were unfit and unprofitable to society. The expectations for conformity to certain standards of productivity and labor further marginalized them, reinforcing their dependence on state-run institutions. While the economic and social systems advanced freedoms for the broader population, they remained largely inaccessible to those whose physical conditions didn't meet these new standards. This exclusion underscores the gaps in the application of freedom and equality during the early industrial age.

2.3 Dependency in Society

Each of us has been dependent on society or family, at least at birth and during upbringing. A healthy individual usually reaches an age where they seek independence and the desire to leave the nest grows. However, some citizens, due to their health conditions, cannot completely detach and are forced to rely partially on the help of others, with the state and its measures often filling in the gaps. “The concept of dependence had a connotation of solidarity in premodern societies, but industrialization led to the exclusion of disabled individuals from society” (Russell, M., & Malhotra, R. 2002)

In contemporary society, stigma continues to surround disability, deepening exclusion from both social and economic spheres. Disability is still often perceived as something that diminishes an individual’s value and contribution to society, which in turn reinforces the exclusion of disabled individuals from fully participating in the workforce. The concept of “dependence” has shifted away from the idea of mutual support and solidarity, and is now viewed primarily as an economic burden on society. The ethics of care, however, emphasizes that we are all interdependent and that society has a responsibility to care for those who need support, particularly individuals with disabilities. The social model of disability challenges the traditional view that disability is merely an individual issue, instead focusing on how societal barriers—whether physical, social, or economic—disable people (Ehlersdanlos, 2024, 3).. In the past, dependence was often viewed negatively due to superstition, and as industrialization progressed, people with disabilities were increasingly marginalized and seen as burdens. Unfortunately, this stigma persists today, making it more difficult for disabled individuals to fully engage with society. The ethics of care advocates for a shift in how we approach care and inclusion, stressing the need for empathy and understanding. It advocates for the development of laws and policies aimed at removing barriers to employment and social participation. This approach focuses on recognizing the dignity and autonomy of all individuals, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their abilities, has the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from society.

Thesis statement

Dignity and social participation are fundamental human rights, yet people with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers that limit their full inclusion. Despite international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the European Pillar of Social Rights, and Slovak legislation and programs, disabled individuals often experience restricted access to education, employment, and public life due to persistent stereotypes and structural inequalities. This comparison highlights that legal frameworks alone are insufficient—real change requires both structural reforms and a shift in public perception.

Work can serve as a tool for self-realization, enabling individuals with disabilities to contribute to society, however, their inclusion must go beyond employment. It is closely tied to education, which provides opportunities for self-development, participation in democratic society, and the ability to advocate for their rights. Raising awareness among the general public—not just employers—improving accessibility, and eliminating societal prejudices are equally essential in fostering an inclusive environment where all individuals, regardless of ability, can thrive.

This thesis examines the gap between policy and practice, exploring how Slovakia implements disability rights and whether its policies effectively promote dignity, participation, and equal opportunities for all. Moreover, it analyzes how educating society about disability not only benefits disabled individuals but also strengthens social cohesion and creates a more diverse and inclusive environment.

3. Methodology

This thesis is a comparative study analyzing employment policies for persons with disabilities in Slovakia within the broader context of European Union strategies. The research examines how Slovak policies align with EU principles, particularly those outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and whether there are mechanisms ensuring compliance when member states fail to implement them. The study explores key factors such as education, dependency on social benefits, and the risk of poverty, all of which are closely linked to government policies and labor market structures. By comparing Slovakia's approach with EU-wide recommendations, the research highlights both the progress made and the persistent gaps in disability employment policies.

The study is rooted in qualitative research, primarily relying on document analysis, expert interviews, and case studies. The document analysis includes European and Slovak policy documents, official reports, and statistical data concerning disability employment and social inclusion. Key sources include EU-level strategies, Slovak national legislation, and reports assessing the effectiveness of disability policies. Additionally, statistical indicators such as employment rates, education levels, and social benefit dependency provide insight into the structural barriers that hinder full workforce participation for persons with disabilities.

To complement the document analysis, several expert interviews were conducted with policymakers and specialists involved in disability policy. The first interview was with Veronika Veslárová, a member of the Slovak National Council, whose agenda includes advocating for and drafting legislation aimed at improving the lives of persons with disabilities. Her insights provided a legislative perspective, shedding light on the challenges of creating effective policies and the practical obstacles in their implementation. Further expertise was gathered through a discussion with Michal Palenik and representatives from the Institute of Employment, focusing on Slovak labor market legislation and the specific ways in which employment policies could be improved to better support persons with disabilities. Additionally, a formal request was submitted via Infozákon to the Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Zuzana Stavrovská, inquiring about the most frequently addressed employment-related issues and how Slovakia applies Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This article guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to work, ensuring equal opportunities and protection against discrimination. The response from the Commissioner's Office provided an institutional

perspective on the challenges persons with disabilities face when entering or remaining in the labor market and the state's efforts to address these barriers.

Beyond policy and expert opinions, the research also incorporates existing case studies and testimonies to ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are included in the discussion. While the study does not feature direct interviews with individuals, it relies on documented experiences from previous research and public records that highlight the everyday challenges faced by disabled people in Slovakia and the EU. These testimonies add a critical dimension to the analysis, illustrating the real-life impact of employment policies beyond legal frameworks and statistical data.

Despite these efforts, the research has certain limitations. One of the main challenges was obtaining direct responses from relevant EU policymakers. Several attempts were made to contact Slovak Members of the European Parliament to gain insight into whether they observe the European Pillar of Social Rights and other strategies being effectively implemented and whether the EU enforces consequences when member states fail to comply. However, no responses were received, meaning that this aspect of the research had to rely exclusively on official documents and secondary sources rather than firsthand perspectives from EU decision-makers. Additionally, the availability of detailed and up-to-date national data on disability employment remains limited. While public reports and statistics provide a broad overview, there is a lack of comprehensive datasets examining the long-term effects of policies, making it difficult to assess their real impact.

Even with these limitations, this thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of how policies for persons with disabilities are structured in Slovakia and how they compare to EU-level strategies. By combining policy analysis, expert perspectives, and case study evidence, it offers a critical examination of the gaps between policy intentions and their actual impact. Ultimately, the findings emphasize the need for a stronger, more integrated approach to disability policy—one that goes beyond employment alone and considers education, social protection, and systemic barriers as essential factors in achieving true inclusion

4. Social Policy

4.1. Workfare vs. Welfare

Creating a space where stigma no longer plays a role in society is crucial. Not every individual is capable of contributing equally to the functioning of the state. The concept of the welfare state represents a system of social measures and support, which can be financial or material, aimed at citizens in need for various individual reasons, such as unemployment, disability, or other circumstances. The main goals of this system include ensuring equality and social protection through public services like healthcare, education, and social benefits. This model became established, particularly after major economic crises, where economic and social inequality played a key role.

Although the idea of restoring human dignity and equality is appealing, this model has not escaped criticism. The most common concerns raised by the public include high costs, unsustainability, and, in some cases, the potential for abuse of social benefits or a weakening of work motivation. This criticism became a catalyst for changes in several countries, which reassessed their social policies and shifted to the so-called workfare model. The aim of this political approach is to make any form of social benefits conditional on citizens' active participation in the open labor market or education. The underlying idea is that work not only provides household income but also enhances self-esteem, independence, improves skills, and facilitates social integration.

Since the 1980s, countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia have adopted workfare policies aimed at reducing dependence on state support. Eligibility for benefits should be conditioned on actively seeking employment, opportunities for retraining, or participation in public works or educational courses. Critics of this model argue, however, that it fails to consider those who face long-term obstacles, such as discrimination, health issues, or a lack of job opportunities. For example, a study conducted in Germany by Gritzmann and Weber (2014) examined the effectiveness of workfare programs in improving self-efficacy among unemployed individuals. The findings suggest that participation in these programs did not necessarily lead to increased confidence or better employment, since many individuals, particularly those with fewer qualifications or significant personal barriers, did not experience meaningful improvements in their employability. This highlights a fundamental issue with workfare policies: while they may succeed in reducing welfare rolls,

they often fail to address the structural challenges that prevent marginalized groups from securing stable employment.

On the other hand, countries like Sweden and Norway have chosen a different approach and implemented the prefare model, which focuses on preventing poverty and social exclusion before individuals reach a critical situation (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). It is important to note that this is not just a question of the individual but also the family, as the suffering extends to them as well. This model emphasizes proactive measures that help maintain stability and prevent people from falling out of the social and economic system. The prefare model requires strong investments in education, affordable housing, healthcare, and support for job mobility. The goal is to build a more inclusive economic structure through collaboration between the government, employers, and trade unions, ensuring flexible working conditions and better work-life balance.

4.2. Welfare stigma and its impact

Social security and support for individuals who are unable to work for various reasons are essential components of the modern welfare state. Governments in many countries, including Slovakia, provide financial assistance through social benefits as a means of improving the living conditions of citizens facing difficult life situations, whether due to disability, unemployment, or other personal or family issues. Social benefits aimed at supporting these individuals seek to ensure basic life needs, stability, and the opportunity to improve their quality of life. However, these benefits sometimes become a tool for stigmatization, creating divides between the majority and minority, as recipients of these benefits are often viewed negatively and labeled as individuals who do not contribute to society.

This phenomenon is not limited to Slovakia but can also be observed in other countries with high levels of social security, such as the Scandinavian countries. Even in these highly solidaristic societies, stigma associated with receiving benefits is present. Examples from Norway show that disadvantaged groups, such as refugees, single mothers, and young people, encounter negative stereotypes (Lundberg & Syltevik, 2024). Similar negative perceptions of benefit recipients are also present in Slovakia, where the most stigmatized groups include the long-term unemployed, individuals with disabilities, and those experiencing difficult life circumstances.

The problem is that stigma around social benefits often overlooks the individual circumstances of recipients, such as health issues, inadequate education, barriers in the job market, or the need to care for a family. The media plays a significant role in shaping and spreading negative narratives about benefit recipients, contributing to a simplified view of these individuals as "lazy" or "unwilling to work." These portrayals ignore the real obstacles many benefit recipients face, further reinforcing the stigma attached to these individuals in society. This stigmatization not only reduces solidarity within society but also hinders these individuals from fully integrating into the workforce and social life.

For people with disabilities, the stigma is even more pronounced, as they are often viewed not only as recipients of benefits but also as individuals who are incapable of contributing to the workforce or being full members of society. These prejudices are fueled not just by the media but also by public discussions and legislative changes. For example, a proposal from the Ministry of Labor to reduce benefits for those in material need who refuse job offers raised concerns that such a measure would further deepen the stigmatization of people dependent on state assistance, particularly those with invisible disabilities, such as mental health conditions. At first glance, their challenges may not be immediately apparent, yet these difficulties hinder their full participation in society, leading to even greater segregation. According to data from the Central Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family (ÚPSVaR), in 2024, there were 705,870 recipients of state social benefits in Slovakia, including 59,502 people receiving material need benefits. These individuals, most of whom are unemployed, have disabilities, are on maternity leave, or are pensioners with low incomes and can often face public condemnation for their dependence on social benefits. Monika Uhlerová from the Confederation of Trade Unions warned that taking away this benefit would push many people even deeper into poverty and put them at risk of social exclusion, making their already difficult situation even worse (TASR, 2024)

Social-democratic regimes and liberal regimes have different perspectives on how social benefits or other forms of assistance should be distributed and based on what criteria. Social-democratic regimes focus on providing extensive and universal social assistance that covers a broad group of citizens, including those with disabilities and the long-term unemployed. In these systems, the emphasis is on protecting and supporting all citizens in need. On the other hand, in liberal regimes, social assistance tends to be more targeted, focusing on those who find themselves in difficult life situations, with an emphasis on individual responsibility and

motivation for social and work activity. The implementation of social measures in these two regimes primarily differs. While social-democratic approaches aim to establish a wide network of social protection ensuring equal opportunities for all, liberal approaches often prefer measures that encourage individuals to work, with social benefits limited to basic needs. This difference in approaches to social benefits and their implementation can be a key factor in either creating or reducing the stigma associated with receiving social benefits

5. European and International Agreements

5.1. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is one of the most important documents in international law regarding the protection of the rights of individuals with disabilities. By ratifying this convention, the Slovak Republic committed to gradually creating the conditions for its implementation. The convention came into force for Slovakia on June 25, 2010, in accordance with Article 45, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. It is part of a broader framework of international law, which also includes documents such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The CRPD is a key extension of the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, and its adoption in 2006 marked a fundamental shift in the way people with disabilities are perceived. Historically, these individuals were seen as objects of charity or social assistance; however, the Convention highlights their rights and their ability to fully participate in societal life.

The goal of the Convention is to ensure equal rights for persons with disabilities, with the countries that have ratified it committing to eliminate discrimination and create conditions for equal opportunities in education, access to the labor market, and healthcare. One of the key aspects of the Convention is supporting social development, with an emphasis on ensuring equality and the protection of human rights in the context of disability. The Convention recognizes that persons with disabilities have the same rights as other members of society and should be allowed to claim these rights and actively participate in social and political life. This approach involves not only removing external barriers but also changing attitudes and perceptions of people with disabilities in society. However, the actual implementation of the Convention depends on individual member states, which is a point that has been criticized by theorist Nancy Fraser, who argued that such policies should be transnationally institutionalized to unify specific approaches.

Overall, the Convention contains 50 articles, but for the purposes of my work, I will highlight Article 27, which focuses on the rights of persons with disabilities in employment. This article emphasizes the need to ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in the

labor market, stressing the importance of protection against any form of discrimination and inequality in the workplace. It also recognizes that persons with disabilities must have access to equally compensated work and opportunities to participate in vocational training programs that improve their chances of employment. Article 24 of the Convention also underscores the right to education, which is essential for the development of individual abilities and provides access to various employment opportunities. Another important aspect of this article is the right of persons with disabilities to join trade unions, meaning they should have the same access to working conditions and guarantees provided by trade unions, such as the protection of labor rights and the enhancement of job security. Article 19 focuses on the right to live in the community, supporting effective social integration and participation in various social activities, thus creating conditions for equal job opportunities and ensuring that persons with disabilities are not excluded from social and work life.

The Convention also emphasizes supporting the participation of persons with disabilities in work programs that help them acquire new skills while providing them with tools to search for and maintain employment. Article 9 addresses the need to ensure equal access to education, work, and other opportunities, aiming to remove barriers preventing persons with disabilities from engaging in various training and programs. These measures include establishing minimum accessibility standards and providing support such as assistance or accessible technologies. The goal is to enable persons with disabilities to participate in all aspects of social life. Additionally, the article highlights the need to support the participation of persons with disabilities in various professional opportunities and entrepreneurial initiatives, including support for starting their own businesses. This aspect enables individuals with disabilities not only to gain employment but also to actively participate in creating job opportunities and entrepreneurial activities, thereby contributing to the broader development of the labor market. Article 30 of the Convention also supports participation in cultural, sports, and recreational activities, allowing persons with disabilities to actively engage in social life, which enhances their dignity and reduces the risk of social isolation. Countries that have ratified this article are committed to ensuring equal working conditions, rules, and wages, as well as equal access to employment opportunities regardless of an individual's health status. Article 20 focuses on mobility and accessibility, which allows persons with disabilities to overcome barriers in movement and actively participate in social and professional life.

5.2. European Pillar of Social Rights

By ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a historic step was taken to establish minimum standards for the protection of the rights of individuals with disabilities. The European Union has continued this momentum by actively working to improve the lives of people with disabilities through various policies, including the 2021–2030 Disability Rights Strategy. This strategy focuses on enhancing accessibility to the labor market, promoting inclusion, and reducing the risk of social exclusion. However, it is important to note that the strategy is not legally binding; it is a "soft" policy tool, and its implementation depends on coordinated efforts at both the national and EU levels. While the strategy offers a critical framework, its success relies on the commitment of individual EU member states to integrate these principles into their national policies.

In 2017, the EU further advanced fundamental principles with the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Pillar of Social Rights includes 20 principles aimed at improving social and working conditions in EU member states. One of the most important aspects highlighted by this pillar is ensuring equal opportunities and support for all citizens, including vulnerable groups like persons with disabilities. Principle 17 of the European Pillar of Social Rights specifically addresses the right of people with disabilities to adequate financial support, which enables them to live with dignity. Additionally, this principle points out the need to provide support services that help persons with disabilities actively engage in the labor market and society. These services should be tailored to the individual's needs and offer support that facilitates real participation in work life, including adjustments to the workplace and working conditions. An important aspect of this principle is the requirement that the work environment be adapted to the needs of employees with disabilities. This ensures not only their equal access to the labor market but also inclusion and consideration of their individual needs. Creating a work environment that is safe and adapted to the needs of persons with disabilities enables these individuals to integrate into regular work life, thus preventing segregation in sheltered workshops or social enterprises.

Equally significant are Principles 3 and 4, which focus on equal opportunities and active support in employment. These principles emphasize equal access to employment for all citizens, regardless of their health status. In practice, this means that countries should create conditions that provide persons with disabilities with equal job opportunities through active employment policies, education, and training. However, the effective implementation of these

principles depends on adhering to the inclusion principles outlined in Principle 17. Without ensuring access to support services, an adapted workplace, and equal opportunities in employment, these principles cannot be fully realized.

Principle 1, which pertains to the right to quality education, is essential for the inclusion of persons with disabilities. This principle stresses the need to ensure equal access to education and training that is adapted to individual needs. Inclusive educational systems, curriculum adjustments, and the provision of necessary assistance and support enable persons with disabilities to reach their potential and acquire the skills needed for employment and active participation in society.

Principle 10, which focuses on the right to participate in cultural and social life, also plays a key role. Persons with disabilities should have equal access to public cultural and social activities, as well as opportunities to engage in civic life. This supports their full integration and ensures equal access to recreational, cultural, and educational activities, which are essential for their active participation in society. While the European Pillar of Social Rights lays out clear guidelines for member states, its implementation relies heavily on national actions and the availability of financial resources.

5.3. Challenges in Implementation in Slovakia

The implementation of measures to support the employment of people with disabilities and improve their quality of life in Slovakia faces several challenges. These challenges are partly due to incomplete adherence to international conventions and European directives. Although Slovakia has ratified important international documents like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and adopted European directives on discrimination and the employment of people with disabilities, the practical implementation of these measures often falls short. This issue is largely influenced by the political will and effectiveness of individual member states in enforcing these rights. The Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities has also highlighted this problem. According to the report, the Office of the Commissioner Zuzana Stravovská received 758 complaints in the past year, with 64% of these being requests for review, 35% seeking counseling, and 1% addressing changes in legislation (SME, 2024). In its 2023 annual report, the office pointed out several recurring violations, which were also mentioned in the press department's written report.

The primary issue involves Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which guarantees people with disabilities the right to work on an equal basis with others. This includes the right to an inclusive, accessible, and open work environment. The countries that have signed the convention have committed to promoting job opportunities for people with disabilities and supporting their career development in the labor market. They also pledged to employ people with disabilities in the public sector and support their employment in the private sector through appropriate policies, such as affirmative action programs and other measures (Kačalková, S. 2025). However, despite efforts to implement these policies, in 2017 Slovakia had one of the lowest inclusion rates for people with disabilities in the labor market (KOIŠOVÁ, E., MASÁROVÁ, J., 2019). The lack of access to employment contributes to social exclusion and economic dependence on social benefits. According to the Statistical Office of Slovakia (2023), the risk of poverty or social exclusion is 10% higher among people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities. This is yet another barrier preventing their full participation in social and economic life. This is directly related to Article 5, which focuses on equality and the prohibition of discrimination. It ensures that people with disabilities are protected from discrimination and guarantees them equal protection under the law, especially in areas such as employment, education, and access to services.

Additionally, according to Member of Parliament Veronika Veslárová, there is also a violation of Article 9, which aims to enable people with disabilities to live independently and fully participate in all aspects of life. The Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities reported attempts by family members to limit the freedom and legal capacity of their relatives with disabilities, even though this was often unnecessary. One of the used examples was a driven desire to control their property. There have also been cases where people's freedoms were restricted in healthcare or social services, leading to limitations on their freedom of movement.

Another concern not being fully respected was Article 24, according to Zuzana Stravovská. It emphasizes the need to provide adequate educational preparation for individuals with disabilities, enabling them to acquire the skills and qualifications necessary to join the workforce and be a full member of society. In Slovakia, approximately 5.88% of primary school pupils are educated in special classes and special schools, which is notably higher than the European average (Hall, R., Drál', P., Fridrichová, P., Hapalová, M., Lukáč, S., Miškolci, J., & Vančíková, K. 2019). This model of education leads to segregation, which in turn affects their access to employment and social inclusion. One of the a reason for this are the shortage of special educators and assistants, which prevents schools from offering inclusive education. Although EU funds are meant to promote inclusion and support people with disabilities such as: European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which operates from 2021 to 2027. Notably, 25% of ESF+ funds are allocated to social inclusion measures, specifically aimed at improving employment opportunities and economic participation for people with disabilities, Slovakia has been struggling to make use of them (European Parliament, n.d.). Veronika Remišová, the opposition politician, warned that Slovakia's slow use of EU funds is so alarming and could result in the loss of €1.54 billion if the absorption rate does not improve (*European Newsroom, 2024*). Additionally, among the V4 countries, Slovakia has the worst track record when it comes to utilizing EU funds.

Slovakia's failure to use these funds isn't just a missed opportunity—it directly affects people with disabilities, limiting their access to education, jobs, and social support. These barriers not only increase the risk of poverty but also impact the dignity of individuals with disabilities and reduce their chances of fully participating in society. As Zuzana Stavrovská, the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, stated: "In addressing individual complaints in 2023, I concluded that the same stereotypes regarding the rights of people with disabilities persist in society, and these views do not reflect the changing trends in this area. What stands out is the need to preserve the human dignity of people with disabilities as a fundamental value, which influences all areas of their lives. Any violation of human dignity is a common thread in all complaints within the civil and family law agenda." (Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, 2024). However, members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic did not acknowledge the 2023 annual report from the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (SME, 2024).

6. Analysis of Employment Policies and Legislation for People with Disabilities

6.1. Slovak Legislation and Employment of People with Disabilities

In the Slovak Republic, the employment of people with disabilities is governed by legislative norms aimed at supporting their integration into the labor market. Under Act No. 461/2003 on Social Insurance, a person is classified as having a disability if their ability to work is reduced by more than 40% due to a long-term health condition. This determination is based on a medical assessment comparing their capacity for gainful employment to that of a healthy individual. According to Act No. 5/2004 on Employment Services, employers with 20 or more employees are required to employ those with disabilities in a number that constitutes 3.2% of the total workforce, as specified in Section 63. In 2019, this applied to 14,000 entities (Poláčková & Prognostic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2020). The Labor Code also defines conditions in Sections 58 and 59 for the involvement of job assistants and supported employment agencies, which play a crucial role in integrating people with disabilities into the workforce. Currently, the Slovak Republic registers 25 agencies with the goal of finding suitable employment and helping with their integration .

However, the legislation also provides alternative options for fulfilling this obligation, which in practice leads to a certain circumvention of employing these individuals. Employers can make use of a compensation fee or pay a levy to support the employment of people with disabilities. This levy amounts to 0.9 times the total labor cost of an employee, calculated from the average wage in Slovakia for the previous year. While these options are not illegal, in practice, they often result in employers not creating actual job positions for people with disabilities (Institute of Employment, n.d.). According to data from the Central Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family (ÚPSVaR) from 2018, 70% of employers fulfilled their obligation by directly employing people with disabilities, while 6% chose to pay the levy, 13% outsourced tasks, and 11% used a combination of these options. Although this system offers flexibility, it has its flaws, as many employers prefer to pay the levy or outsource tasks rather than directly employing people with disabilities (Institute of Employment, n.d.).

6.2. Impacts on the Labor Market and Economic Situation

Employing people with disabilities has a dual benefit – on one hand, it contributes to their economic independence, reduces reliance on social benefits, and increases their financial stability. On the other hand, it strengthens their voice in society. When they have access to meaningful work, they not only improve their economic situation but also become active participants in decision-making processes and can effectively advocate for their rights. In an ideal democratic society, the labor market should operate as a fair competition, where everyone can realize their abilities and contribute to the development of society. This process allows them to engage in shaping public policies and decisions that directly affect them, increasing their involvement and ability to influence the direction of society.

When people with disabilities become visible participants in the labor market, it fosters a more inclusive and accepting society—one where they are recognized as equal members. Institute for Labor and Family Research (2023) suggests that increasing their employment in state and public administration could enhance both the efficiency and accessibility of public services. Additionally, integrating people with disabilities into the workforce can help reduce social benefit costs and boost tax revenues, positively impacting public finances. By providing opportunities that uphold their dignity and accommodate their specific needs, society enables them to transition from passive recipients of support to active contributors to the public good. Their inclusion benefits not only them as individuals but also strengthens the economy and promotes social cohesion. Unlocking their talents and potential creates a more resilient and fair labor market, benefiting everyone (Institute of Employment, n.d.).

According to statistics from the European Commission, only half of people with disabilities are employed, compared to three-quarters of people without disabilities. Current data from Slovakia are not fully available, but according to the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family (2023) an average of 5,793 people with disabilities were registered at labor offices, which accounted for 3.34% of the total number of job seekers. In comparison to 2022, when 6,858 people with disabilities were registered (3.64% of the total), there was a decrease of 1,065 individuals. According to Zuzana Poláčková from the Prognostic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, in her 2020 publication, this phenomenon occurred mainly after workers from the strong post-World War II generations retired and were replaced by a smaller population from the 1990s. For example, in 2017, 67,500 people left the labor market, while only 33,800 new entrants were recorded. This negative demographic

development was also reflected in high unemployment rates, which in political discussions were often associated with the economic successes of Slovakia. However, this low unemployment was largely the result of the rapid exit of workers from the labor market, which many employers felt was an extreme labor shortage. In response, many businesses turned to foreign labor, while others sought employees from groups that had previously faced significant barriers to employment. As a result, the employment rate of people with disabilities increased by nearly 1% (Poláčková & Prognostic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2020).

6.3. Challenges and Stigma in the Labor Market

The labor market in Slovakia for people with disabilities continues to show significant segmentation, with a large portion of this group employed in sheltered workshops or social enterprises (Poláčková, Z. 2020). While this type of employment offers some advantages, such as adapted working environments, it limits opportunities for career advancement and does not provide the same working conditions or compensation as regular jobs. This leads to lower participation of people with disabilities in the labor market, increasing their reliance on social benefits and restricting their economic independence. In October 2023, there were 5,551 unemployed citizens with disabilities registered by the employment offices (Oláhová K., 2023). Data for the years 2024 and 2023 are not available, but in 2022, the employment rate gap between people with disabilities and those without was 21 percentage points. A large percentage of people with disabilities are either unemployed or working in non-standard forms of employment, such as sheltered workshops or part-time jobs.

Sheltered workshops, although providing employment for people with disabilities, can be seen as a form of segregation, as they do not allow full integration into the broader labor market and do not provide equal opportunities for professional growth. This system creates barriers for those who could contribute to the economy more broadly but are excluded from the opportunity to work in the open labor market. However, on the other hand, Viera Záhorcová, PhD., an expert in employment and activation, views sheltered workshops as an intermediary stage between school and the open labor market. Sheltered workshops can serve as a safe space for people with disabilities to acquire skills and qualifications they may have lacked due to insufficient educational opportunities or society's reluctance to fully integrate them. Member of Parliament Veronika Veslárová shares this view, seeing sheltered workshops as a space for developing individual capabilities and preparing individuals for the

real labor market. A good example of a sheltered workshop functioning as a bridge between the specific needs of employees with disabilities and the regular labor market is the Radnička Café, which opened in 2024 in collaboration with the Slovak municipality.

Other challenges include insufficient accessibility of workplaces for people with disabilities. This issue is being addressed by the European Accessibility Act (EAA), which focuses on ensuring accessibility to public services and workplaces for people with disabilities.

Additionally, Slovak legislation requires employers to provide the same working conditions for people with disabilities as for other employees, which in practice does not always happen, especially in regions with lower economic potential. In 2022, the Bratislava region had one of the lowest rates at just 2.1%, while the eastern part of the country faced much higher levels, with unemployment in East Slovakia rising to 10.7% by mid-year, for instance Prešov.

(OECD, 2024). The Strategic Employment Development Priorities in Slovakia through 2030 emphasize that the lower employment rate of people with disabilities increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion, as it has been mentioned several times, however for individuals from regions with limited opportunities, the risk of falling below the poverty line is even greater. Accessibility is essential for the full inclusion of people with disabilities in society (Gestor horizontal principles, n.d.). This means also an equal access for people with disabilities to physical and digital environments, information, and services. While investments in accessibility are gradually increasing, there are still areas where modern technologies and assistive devices remain unavailable or excessively expensive, reducing their reach and usability. Without adequate technical support, it is often difficult for people with disabilities to perform everyday tasks and participate in the labor market. Veronika Veslárová has documented cases where a person with a disability had to modify their workspace using personal resources to accommodate their needs.

Beyond structural and economic barriers, societal perceptions and stigma significantly influence the employment prospects of people with disabilities in Slovakia. The Slovak Disability Discourse Report indicates that a pervasive stigma against disabled workers persists in many workplaces, with employers often perceiving them as less capable or more expensive to employ. This perception leads to reluctance in hiring, even when financial incentives and support mechanisms from the EU and national government are available, such as National Action Plan for the Employment of People with Disabilities, which focuses on

improving labor market accessibility, providing financial incentives for employers, and ensuring training and employment services for people with disabilities.

According to data from the Operational Programme Employment and Social Inclusion up to 40% of employed persons with disabilities in Slovakia work part-time, reinforcing the assumption that employers frequently doubt their ability to work full-time. Concerns about increased absenteeism, lower efficiency, and higher operational costs further fuel employer reluctance. However, research contradicts these fears. Several studies show that employees with disabilities frequently exhibit strong work ethics, high levels of job commitment, and lower turnover rates than their non-disabled counterparts.

Bureaucratic and legal obstacles also play a crucial role in discouraging employers from hiring people with disabilities. Many employers perceive Slovakia's Labor Code as overly protective of disabled employees, which, rather than promoting their employment, often has the unintended effect of deterring it (Poláčková, 2020). Employers worry that once they hire someone with a disability, it will be difficult to dismiss them if needed. This concern is further amplified by fears of potential lawsuits for discrimination, making some employers hesitant to take the risk in the first place. Also, Slovak law requires employers to get prior approval from the Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family before dismissing an employee with a disability. While this rule is meant to protect workers from unfair termination, it doesn't always work as intended. According to Member of the Parliament Veronika Veslárová, if the Labor Office fails to respond within the set deadline, the request is automatically considered approved—something that can be advantageous for employers but problematic in practice. She criticizes this system, arguing that such short deadlines don't allow for a proper assessment of each case, leading to rushed or uninformed decisions. The Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Zuzana Stavrovská, shares this concern, pointing out that the current approach contradicts the goals of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly Article 27, which guarantees equal access to employment without discrimination and according to them, this has to be changed.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

Dignity is fundamentally linked to participation, yet many people with disabilities are denied the opportunity to be active members of society due to inaccessible education, limited employment opportunities, and persistent stereotypes. Rather than focusing on empowerment through education and workforce integration, Slovakia's policies primarily emphasize financial support, which, while providing some security, does not lead to meaningful inclusion. Employment is often seen as a means of economic stability, but it also plays a crucial role in self-respect, personal fulfillment, and social integration. However, the lack of inclusive education leaves many people with disabilities without the necessary skills to enter the workforce.

A key finding is that employment rates remain critically low for people with disabilities. In Slovakia, only 18.7% of disabled individuals are employed, compared to 72.4% of the general population. Although policies mandate that businesses employ a certain percentage of disabled workers, many choose to pay penalties instead of hiring them, as stated by the institution of employment. This suggests that Slovakia's legal framework does not create real incentives for inclusion, allowing employers to sidestep meaningful engagement. Proposed solutions include increasing penalties or, as suggested by Veronika Veslárová, removing the penalty option altogether and instead focusing on explicitly integrating disabled individuals into companies or financing sheltered workshops. Without proper access to education, people with disabilities have fewer career opportunities, making them more dependent on social benefits. People with disabilities should not be viewed as recipients of aid but as active contributors to society. Other EU countries, such as Sweden, have developed inclusive vocational training programs to ensure that disabled individuals acquire the necessary skills for employment. Slovakia's fragmented and underfunded approach prevents such progress, leaving many people with disabilities confined to low-skilled jobs, sheltered workshops, or long-term unemployment.

Beyond economic exclusion, the inability to secure employment often results in profound social isolation, increasing the risk of mental health issues. Without work, people with disabilities struggle to form social networks, engage in community life, and find their place in society. In a culture where work is closely tied to identity, exclusion from employment contributes to a sense of invisibility. However, true inclusion goes beyond work; it encompasses education, accessibility, and meaningful participation in cultural and

community life. The study highlights that many of the limitations faced by people with disabilities are not due to their impairments but to systemic barriers and societal misconceptions. Future policy initiatives should not only expand vocational training programs for both employers and employees but also raise public awareness to promote a more inclusive society, ensuring that people with disabilities are fully integrated into both the workplace and broader social life. Changing how society perceives disability is essential, as true inclusion benefits everyone by creating a richer and more dynamic environment. Research from other European countries demonstrates that, when given proper support, people with disabilities are equally capable and committed. Their determination to overcome challenges often compensates for any skill gaps, making them valuable contributors to society. As one individual put it, *"The limits are not in my mind, but in the minds of others who are then surprised."*

This research contributes to existing literature by emphasizing that disability policy should not be limited to financial support but should actively create pathways to employment and social participation. Countries with stronger social models, such as Norway and the Netherlands, emphasize proactive inclusion through education, employment incentives, and public awareness campaigns. Ensuring access to education, public spaces, and community activities is not just a matter of economic policy but of human dignity. As this study demonstrates, work provides more than financial security—it fosters self-respect, belonging, and participation in society. There is still a common misconception that people with disabilities are entirely dependent on the state, and while it is true that the government must provide support, including social assistance, this does not mean they cannot contribute to society. Although Slovakia receives funding through EU social policy to support, among other things, social assistants, caregivers, and other essential social services, significant challenges remain. Despite these financial resources, there is still a critical shortage of workers in these roles, as the sector faces demanding working conditions and low wages. The lack of available care workers not only impacts those in need of assistance but also places additional burdens on their families, who are often forced to take on caregiving responsibilities themselves, further deepening both social and economic pressures. These findings suggest that the barriers to inclusion are not primarily due to disability itself, but rather to systemic factors.

Implications and Conclusion

The Slovak Republic, as a member of the European Union, continues to face significant challenges in ensuring the full social participation of people with disabilities. Although legal frameworks exist to protect their rights, the reality is that many disabled individuals still experience exclusion, a loss of dignity, and an increased risk of social isolation. The inability to participate in society on equal footing with others deprives them of opportunities to form relationships, express themselves, and engage in meaningful activities that affirm their identity and self-worth. While Slovakia has made legislative commitments, policy implementation remains weak. Without structural reforms, the gap between legal frameworks and the lived experiences of disabled individuals will persist.

One of the most pressing issues is the failure of employment policies to create real opportunities for people with disabilities. The current approach offers businesses an easy way to avoid hiring obligations without fostering an inclusive work environment. To address this, Slovakia must restructure its approach by creating stronger incentives for companies to hire and retain disabled employees, such as tax benefits, wage subsidies, and financial support for workplace adaptations. At the same time, employer training programs should be expanded to challenge misconceptions and demonstrate the benefits of disability inclusion.

The failure to create employment opportunities is deeply connected to the shortcomings in Slovakia's education system. Many people with disabilities struggle to enter the workforce because they lack access to quality education and vocational training. Without the opportunity to develop essential skills, long-term employment remains out of reach. Slovakia's education system does not fully accommodate students with disabilities, often leaving them without the qualifications needed to compete in the job market. Improving inclusive education should be a priority, with reforms focusing on integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools, expanding vocational training programs, and improving the accessibility of learning environments. Countries that have successfully implemented inclusive education models, such as Sweden, have demonstrated that early integration into the education system directly correlates with higher employment rates later in life. Without such reforms, Slovakia's employment policies will remain ineffective, as too many disabled individuals will continue to face limited career prospects.

Beyond employment and education, social stigma remains a fundamental barrier to inclusion. Many people with disabilities hesitate to disclose their condition due to fear of discrimination, which highlights the ongoing societal exclusion they face. The perception that disability equates to dependency continues to influence public attitudes, making it even more difficult for disabled individuals to be seen as full and equal members of society. Tackling this issue requires more than just policy adjustments—it demands a broader cultural shift. Public awareness campaigns can play a vital role in changing perceptions, particularly if they showcase the achievements and contributions of people with disabilities in various fields. Increasing the visibility of disabled individuals in leadership roles, politics, media, and cultural institutions would further challenge stereotypes and reinforce the message that disability does not limit potential. Additionally, businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies should actively promote workplace diversity initiatives, ensuring that disability inclusion is integrated into broader social strategies rather than treated as an afterthought.

Ultimately, disability inclusion is not just about economic participation but about dignity, rights, and full engagement in society. Slovakia has the legal structures in place, but without stronger implementation, better education policies, and a transformation in public attitudes, the barriers to inclusion will persist. The responsibility for change does not rest solely with policymakers—businesses must recognize the value of hiring people with disabilities, and society as a whole must shift from viewing disability as a limitation to seeing it as a natural part of human diversity. True inclusion will only be achieved when people with disabilities are not just accommodated but fully integrated into all aspects of life. The ability to participate fully in one's community should not be a privilege—it is a right that must be protected and actively promoted for all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

Resumé

Táto bakalárska práca sa zaoberá otázkou dôstojnosti a užitočnosti osôb so zdravotným postihnutím v spoločnosti. Vychádza z predpokladu, že dôstojnosť nie je len individuálnym pocitom, ale je formovaná spoločenskými podmienkami, ktoré umožňujú alebo obmedzujú plnohodnotnú participáciu jednotlivca. Táto práca preto skúma, ako sú osoby so zdravotným postihnutím vnímané, aké systémové bariéry a stereotypy ovplyvňujú ich začlenenie do spoločnosti a akú úlohu v tomto procese zohráva práca, vzdelanie a sociálna politika. Rovnako tak skúma fenomén stigmy, ktorý ešte viac umocňuje pocit izolácie.

Jedným z kľúčových konceptov, na ktorých je táto práca založená, je teória Nancy Fraser o redistribučnej a uznávacej spravodlivosti, ktorá ukazuje, že ekonomické nerovnosti nemožno oddeliť od kultúrnej stigmatizácie. Jej argumenty spočívajú aj v potrebe rozšíriť portfólio príležitostí a zahrnúť tak skupiny, ktoré sú často vylúčené. Táto perspektíva úzko súvisí s teóriou Ervinga Goffmana a jeho konceptom stigmatizácie, ktorý ďalej pomáha vysvetliť, prečo sa osoby so zdravotným postihnutím často stretávajú s obmedzenými možnosťami sociálnej a pracovnej integrácie. Práca sa opiera o myšlienku, že zamestnanie nie je len ekonomickou nevyhnutnosťou, ale nástrojom sociálnej identity a uznania. Avšak nejde výlučne o zamestnanosť – zamestnanie je len jedným z aspektov širšieho vnímania seba samého ako užitočného a hodnotného člena spoločnosti. Táto práca preto skúma aj alternatívne formy zapojenia do spoločenského diania, ktoré môžu prispieť k dôstojnosti – vzdelanie, sebarealizácia, komunitné aktivity či aktívna účasť na tvorbe verejných politík.

Prvé kapitoly sa venujú historickému kontextu vnímania zdravotného postihnutia, kde sa ukazuje, že osoby so zdravotným postihnutím boli v dejinách často vylučované z verejného života – či už kvôli poverám, ekonomickým zmenám, alebo zdravotníckym modelom, ktoré ich vnímali skôr ako objekt starostlivosti, než ako plnohodnotných občanov. Štvrtá kapitola rozoberá teoretický rámec, kde sa práca opiera o koncepty Nancy Fraser (spravodlivosť ako redistribúcia a uznanie) a Ervinga Goffmana (stigmatizácia a jej dôsledky). Zároveň skúma etiku starostlivosti (ethics of care) ako prístup, ktorý ponúka alternatívny pohľad na sociálnu spravodlivosť založenú na solidarite a vzájomnej závislosti.

Piata kapitola analyzuje sociálnu politiku a jej vplyv na život osôb so zdravotným postihnutím. Táto práca sa venuje aj diskusii medzi workfare a prefare modelom, pričom sa sústreďuje na to, že sociálne dávky môžu byť vnímané aj ako stigmatizujúce a aké sú

možnosti ich premeny na prostriedok podpory aktívnej participácie osôb so zdravotným postihnutím. Rozdiel spočíva najmä vo vnímaní jednotlivých štátov a ich nastavení, či už v rámci sociálno-demokratického režimu alebo liberálneho systému, ktorý kladie väčší dôraz na princíp meritokracie, kde môže hroziť väčšia miera stigmy. Šiesta kapitola sa venuje medzinárodným a európskym dohovorom – konkrétne Dohovoru OSN o právach osôb so zdravotným postihnutím a Európskemu pilieru sociálnych práv. Skúma, ako tieto dokumenty ovplyvňujú národné politiky a či sú efektívne implementované v Slovenskej republike, rovnako tak vyzdvihuje výzvy, ktorými sa musí Slovenská Republika vysporiadať nakoľko ešte stále dochádza k porušeniu jednotlivých práv.

A nakoniec siedma kapitola prináša analýzu zamestnanosti osôb so zdravotným postihnutím v Slovenskej republike a akým spôsobom sa spoločnosť zamýšľa pri ich integrácii do spoločnosti a otvoreného trhu práce, rovnako tak skúma jednotlivé prekážky. Ukazuje sa napríklad, že hoci existuje legislatívna povinnosť zamestnávať osoby so zdravotným postihnutím, veľká časť firiem namiesto toho platí pokuty alebo outsourcuje prácu do chránených dielní, čím sa vyhýba ich skutočnej integrácii do pracovného trhu a neuvedomuje si aký to môže mať reálny dopad. V záverečných kapitolách sa práca zameriava na diskusiu o alternatívnych možnostiach sociálnej participácie – od vzdelania, cez komunitné projekty, až po reformy sociálnej politiky, ktoré by mohli zlepšiť podmienky osôb so zdravotným postihnutím.

Výsledky výskumu ukazujú, že dôstojnosť osôb so zdravotným postihnutím nie je len otázkou zamestnanosti, ale širšieho uznania ich hodnoty v spoločnosti. Práca je dôležitá, ale nie je jediným spôsobom, akým sa môže človek cítiť užitočným. Alternatívne formy zapojenia do spoločnosti, ako je vzdelanie, dobrovoľníctvo či občianska angažovanosť, môžu rovnako prispieť k dôstojnosti jednotlivca. Spoločnosť ich často vníma ako pasívnych prijímateľov pomoci, čo oslabuje ich postavenie a obmedzuje možnosti ich zapojenia do sociálneho a ekonomického života. Súčasné nastavenie systému sociálnych dávok často vedie k závislosti namiesto podpory integrácie do spoločnosti. Lepšie nastavené mechanizmy by mohli pomôcť odstrániť tieto bariéry.

Zamestnávateľia vnímajú zamestnávanie osôb so zdravotným postihnutím ako komplikované, hoci výskumy ukazujú, že títo pracovníci sú lojálni a spoľahliví. Prekonávanie predsudkov je kľúčové pre zvýšenie zamestnanosti tejto skupiny. Potrebná je osveta a vzdelávanie nielen zamestnávateľov a zamestnancov, ale predovšetkým širokej verejnosti, ktorá by mala lepšie

porozumieť prínosom rozmanitej a inkluzívnej spoločnosti. Je nevyhnutné, aby sa spoločnosť zbavila stereotypov a vnímala ľudí so zdravotným postihnutím nie ako pasívnych prijímateľov pomoci, ale ako rovnocenných členov komunity, ktorí môžu prispieť svojimi schopnosťami a talentom. Ak chceme skutočne podporiť dôstojnosť a plnohodnotné zapojenie osôb so zdravotným postihnutím, je dôležité šíriť povedomie o tom, že inklúzia neprosieva len menšinám, ale celej spoločnosti tým, že posilňuje solidaritu, rovnosť príležitostí a sociálnu súdržnosť. Slovenská republika zaostáva v implementácii európskych a medzinárodných záväzkov týkajúcich sa osôb so zdravotným postihnutím. Hoci legislatíva existuje, jej praktická aplikácia je často nedostatočná a v niektorých prípadoch neúčinná.

Odporúčania tejto práce smerujú k reforme systému zamestnávania osôb so zdravotným postihnutím, posilneniu inkluzívneho vzdelávania a zmene naratívu o zdravotnom postihnutí – posun od vnímania osôb so zdravotným postihnutím ako pasívnych prijímateľov pomoci k ich uznaniu ako plnohodnotných členov spoločnosti, rovnako tak by mal k tejto otázke pristupovať štát a byť tak inšpiráciou. Táto práca ukazuje, že dôstojnosť nie je len otázkou individuálneho nastavenia, ale výsledkom sociálnych a politických podmienok, ktoré je možné formovať a meniť

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