POLICY NOTE
Policy Note: 22, August 2023

How to halt the declining labour force participation rates among female Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Uganda.

Executive Statement

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) face significant challenges in accessing labour market opportunities, but female PWDs in Uganda face more severe constraints in accessing employment. Whereas male and female PWDs's labour force participation rates declined because of the COVID pandemic, by 2021, male PWDS recovered to pre-COVID participation rates, whereas female PWDs were yet to recover. Despite various efforts in place to increase their participation in gainful employment, the stagnation in labor force participation among female PWDs suggests that PWDs are unable to successfully enter the labor market. This policy note examines the challenges PWDs face in the Ugandan labour market, emphasizing the disparities and obstacles faced by disabled women. These disparities manifest in the form of gender-based pay disparities, limited representation in the formal sector, and inadequate workplace modifications to account for people with disabilities working there, as well as the low levels of schooling among school-going PWDs contribute to these challenges. These underscore the urgent need to promote formal sector inclusion, formulate gender-inclusive policies, enforce mandatory workplace modifications, and provide financial support and subsidies for assistive and mobility devices.

Introduction

Although Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) account for a significant share of the Ugandan population, they remain underrepresented in the country's labour force, predominantly female PWDs. The 2014 National Population and Housing Census indicates that at least 12.4 percent of the Ugandan population has at least one form of disability (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2014).[1] Women have a slightly higher rate of disability of 13.7% compared to 11% for men. The 2021 National Labour Force Survey (NLFS) showed that the labour force participation rate for women with disabilities reduced from 47 to 6 percent during 2016/17 and 2021 compared to a reduction from 62 to 60 percent for male PWDs (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022).[2] On the other hand, during the implementation of the National Development Plans (NDPs), the Government of Uganda has attempted to create an enabling environment to facilitate the full participation of persons with disabilities in economic activities and increase the employability of PWDs. For example, in FY 2009/10, the Ministry of Gender Labor and Social Development (MGLSD) introduced a National Special Grant for PWDs to support the income-generating activities of PWDs and enable them to become partners in the development process. Other initiatives include enacting the 2011 National Employment Policy, which promotes equal employment opportunities for PWDs, and having a national council for disabled people. In addition, the Ministry of Public Service continues implementing the 2006 Employment Act, which prohibits discrimination against PWDs in employment (National Council for Disability, 2019). [3]

However, despite these and other initiatives targeting PWDs, their labour force participation has reduced significantly in the recent past, falling from 54 to 42 percent between 2016/17 and 2021 (UBOS, 2021). This brief examines the employment situation of female PWDs compared to their male counterparts. It is based on the 2021 National Labour Force Survey (NLFS) analysis. The brief makes key observations in line with the employment status of PWDs. It highlights various policy actions that policy actors could undertake to reverse the declining female PWD's labour participation.

PWDs participation in the Uganda labour force

Female PWDs have faced a worsening labour situation, especially during the post-COVID era. Figure 1 shows the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for PWDs during 2016/17 and 2021. It indicated that in 2016/17, the females had a lower labour force participation rate of 15 percentage points; this gap reduced to 13 percentage points in 2019/20 before widening to 24 percentage points in 2021. It is worth noting that both female and male PWD labour force participation was reduced between 2016/17 and 2019/20, and the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated employment restrictions may partly explain this. Nonetheless, the male PWD's labour force participation rates have recovered by 2021, whereas female PWDs have not moved in tandem. This is the situation despite advances in recognizing the rights of disabled individuals. Previous research notes that gender disparities and disability-related biases impede the full integration of disabled women into the workforce (ICED,2023).[4] Indeed, within Uganda, PWD individuals have historically faced challenges in various spheres of life, with access to gainful employment being a critical concern (MGSLSD, 2020).[5] These multifaceted challenges range from societal attitudes and stereotypes to physical and infrastructural barriers.

Gender-based Pay Disparities among PWDs:

Disabled women in Uganda face substantial economic disparities, receiving significantly lower cash payments than disabled men. Figure 2, which compares the median pay for PWDs, shows that the median monthly pay for male PWDs is 188,000 Ugandan Shillings, whereas female PWDs receive only 169,000 Ugandan Shillings. This shows that the income earned by female PWDs is significantly lower than that of male PWDs. The same

Figure 1 Trends in PWDs labour force participation by gender 2016/17-2021, (%)

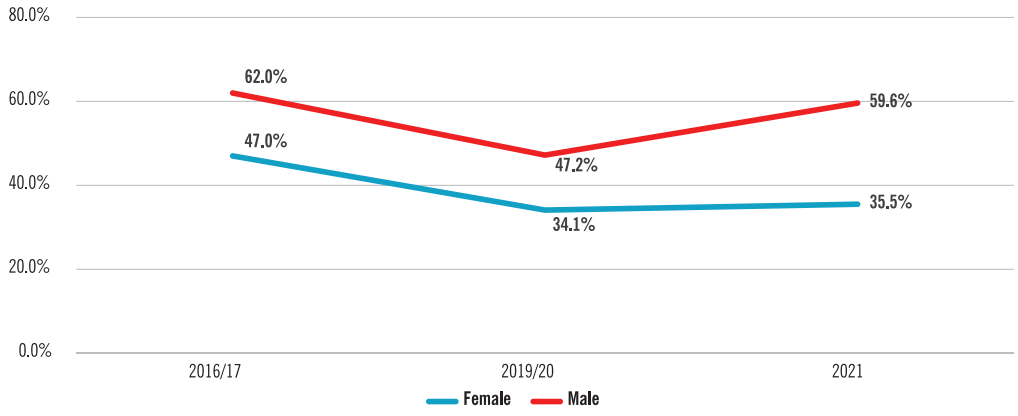
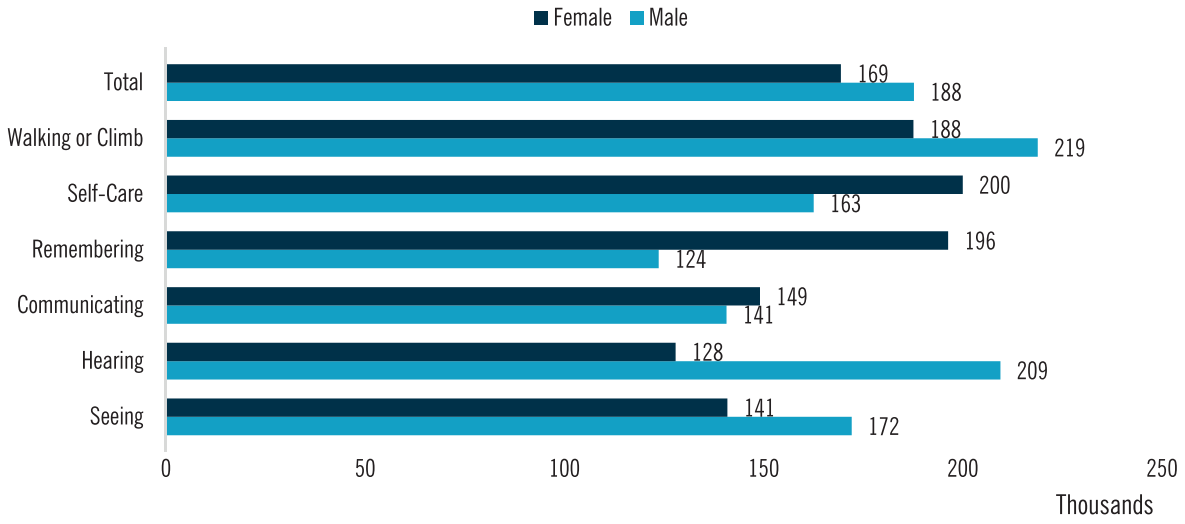


Figure 2 Median monthly pay by disability type, 2021 (UGX, 000s).



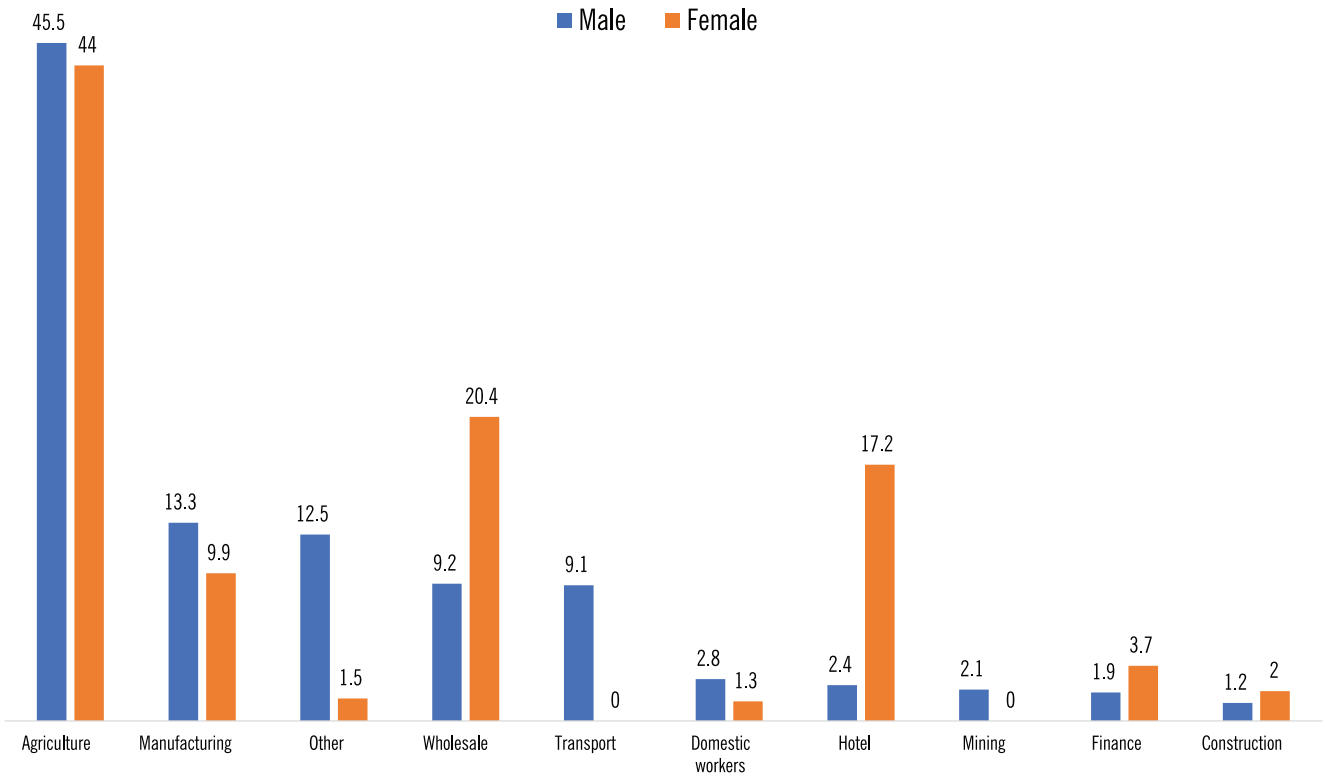
Source: Author's construction using the 2021 NLFS data

chart shows that the most considerable difference in median pay by gender is among PWDs affected by hearing, followed by those affected by sight. Generally, these findings concur with the MGLSD (2020) report that reveals that disabled people typically experience a greater likelihood of low pay, if not unemployment. For women with disabilities, these pay inequalities are partly attributed to stereotypes and biases associated with their gender and disability. In addition, studies such as Mitra et al. (2013) reveal that it is primarily women with disabilities who are more likely to have a lower economic status due to their lower educational achievements and fewer available economic opportunities.[6] These disabled females are, most times, less likely to attend school than their male counterparts.

PWDs are disproportionately underrepresented in formal sector employment, further accentuating disparities in employment. According to the 2021 NLFS, only 9 percent of PWDs are employed in the formal sector, while 65 percent work in the informal sector and 26 percent work in households (UBoS, 2022). The corresponding rates for individuals with no disability are 12.5 percent formal, 68 percent informal employment, and only 20 percent the household. As such, PWDs are significantly less likely to work in the formal sector and have a higher disposition to work in the household. This may be the only option for PWDs to be employed in the household. This finding is supported by the 2016/17 manpower survey that revealed that only about 1.3% of the formal sector workforce have people with disabilities (UBOS, 2018).[7] In addition, girls and women with disabilities face several structural barriers ranging from discrimination information and communication barriers, which limit their full participation in the formal economy. Therefore, they end up seeking employment in the informal sector under unregulated environments that are less likely to pay them an appropriate wage.

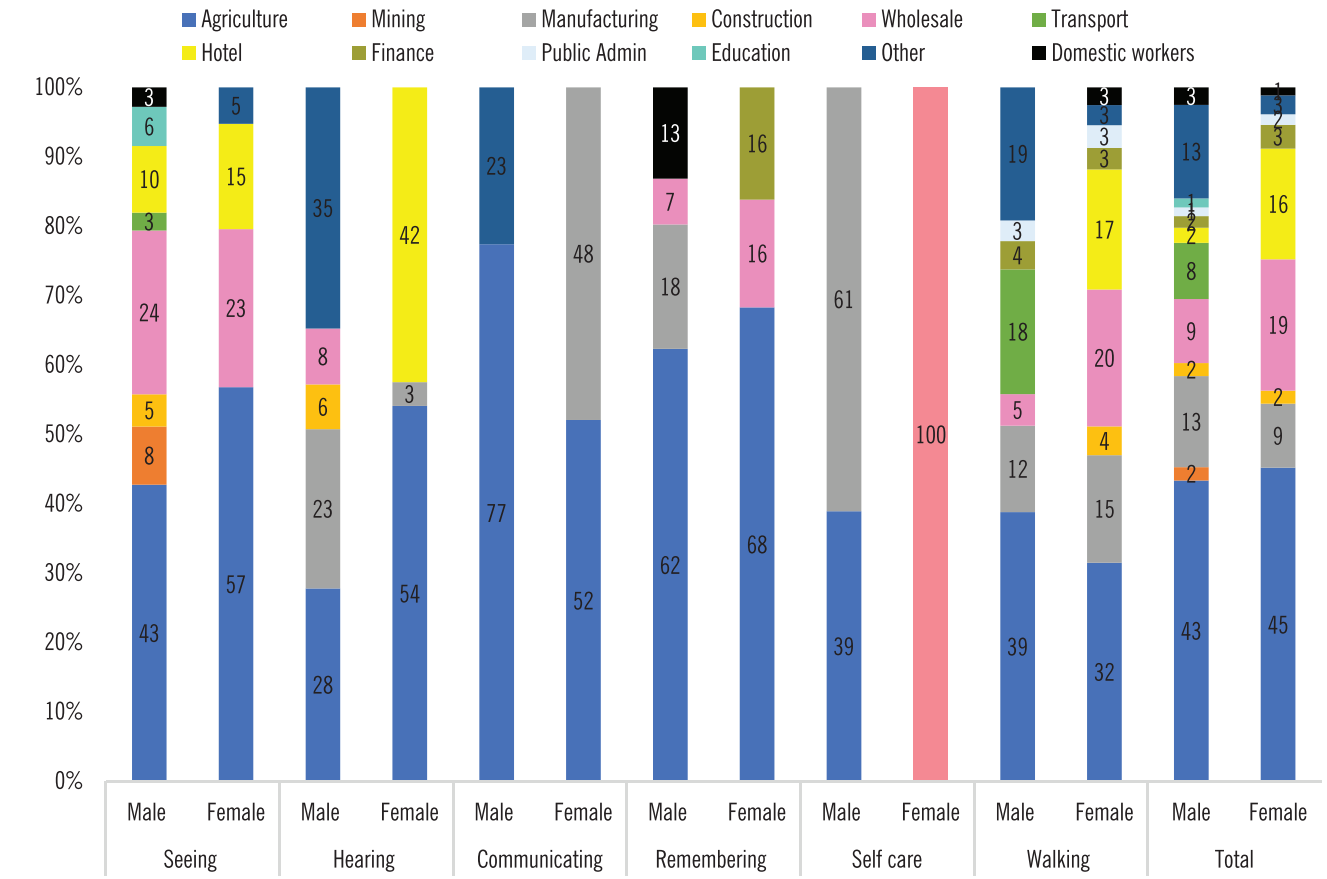
Of the PWDs in paid employment, the majority are in the private sector. Figure 3 shows that agriculture is the dominant sub-sector of employment across employment sub-sectors, accounting for at least 44% of all PWDs. For female PWDs, the second most important sub-sector of employment is wholesale trade (20.4%), followed by hotels (17.2%). For male PWDs, the second most important subsector is manufacturing, followed by wholesale trade and transport at about 9% each. For the PWDs who are lucky to find employment in the public sector (not in the chart), the females are predominantly employed in the public administration sub-sector (100%), while males are spread between public administration and education (26% each) and other sub-sector (48.2%).

Figure 3 Nature of Employment of PWDs in the Private Sector by Gender, 2021 (%)



Source: Author's construction using the 2021 NLFS data

Figure 4 Sub Sectors of employment by disability type and gender, 2021 (%)



Source: Author's construction using the 2021 NLFS data

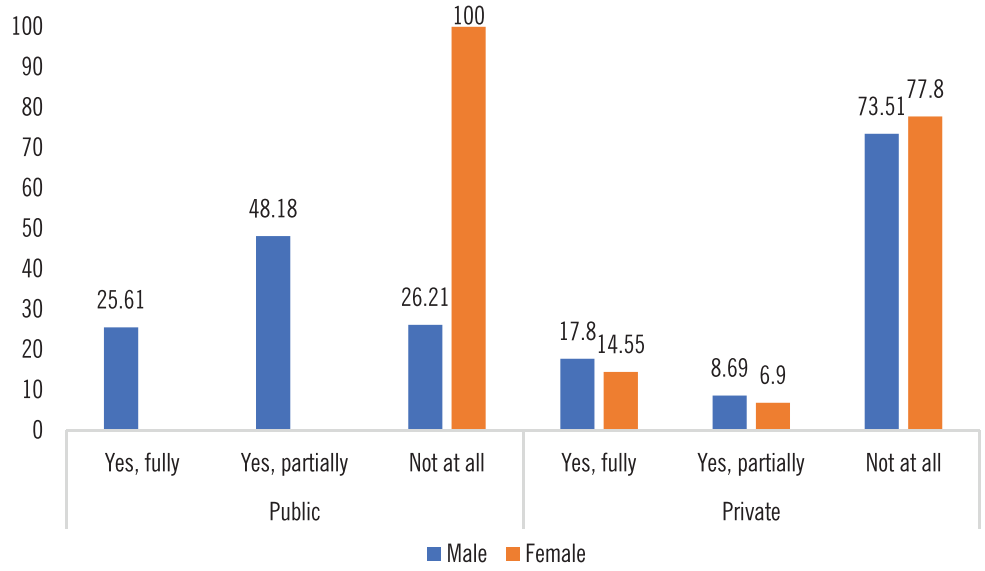
Employment in the different sub-sectors differs by the nature of disability. Figure 4 shows the distribution of employment sub-sectors by nature of disability. The chart suggests that female PWDs with seeing, hearing and walking impairments are able to find work in the hotels. In addition, the chart reveals that hardly any female PWDs—affected by sight—are employed in the mining, construction and education sectors of employment. These findings would be expected for the mining and construction sectors as these are traditionally male-dominated sub-sectors, and women face discrimination in an attempt to enter such industries. However, for the education sector, many institutions may not have made their physical spaces, materials and technology fully accessible to individuals with visual impairment, as well as the lack of training opportunities and lack of role models, among others, may hinder their entry into the sector.

The hotel sector sub-sector has the highest share of female PWDs with hearing challenges, possibly due to the crucial role of communication with customers in the hotel industry. Those with hearing difficulties proficient in sign language may be sought after for customer service provisions in such settings. Additionally, the findings suggest that the hotel sector employs more women with walking disabilities. This could be explained by various reasons ranging from the accessible facilities that hotels often have and the wide range of job roles that hotels offer, including those that individuals with mobility limitations, such as reservations and customer service, can effectively execute. Furthermore, the manufacturing sector provides job roles, such as reservations and customer service, that individuals with mobility limitations, including women with communication disabilities, can effectively perform.

Gender disparities in the consideration of workplace accommodations:

Workplace modifications account for disabled men and not their female counterparts, hence a barrier to their inclusion. Figure 5 shows statistics on employed PWDs whose workplace was modified to account for the disabilities they have. More males than females report that their workplaces have been modified (48% vs. 17.8%). The modifications primarily cater to disabled men, neglecting the unique requirements of disabled women. Disabled women may

Figure 5 Percentage of employed PWDs whose workplace has been modified to account for their difficulties.



Source: Author's construction using the 2021 NLFS data

require specific accommodations related to healthcare, reproductive health, breastfeeding support, and considerations for potential mobility challenges that are uniquely gendered. This warrants attention as it hinders women's productivity, denies disabled women equal opportunities and hinders their overall integration into the workforce. Workplace accommodations enable individuals with disabilities to perform optimally in their jobs. When employers do not provide necessary workplace accommodations, disabled women face obstacles in integrating into the workforce, which limits their access to equal opportunities and participation.

Most PWDs of school-going age are not in school, which may partly explain the employment and associated gender disparities. Figures 6 and 7 show that 69.7% of the female PWDs and 72.4% of the male PWDs of school going age are not in school. These percentages are highest among those with walking (90%), communicating (84%), and remembering disabilities (83%). This further affirms their vulnerability. These findings are supported by the 2014 NPHS analytical report on PWDs, which revealed that persons with walking and remembering/concentrating difficulties were more likely not to attend school compared to persons with other categories of disabilities (UBOS, 2019).[8] Due to the high cost of assistive and mobility devices, lack of communication and informational tools such as Braille, and other factors, schools are unable to provide a disability-friendly environment. This lack of accessibility in schools and homes leads to persons with walking and remembering/concentrating difficulties being more likely not to attend school compared to persons with other categories of

Figure 6 Percentage of female PWDs aged 14 to 17 years in and out of school.

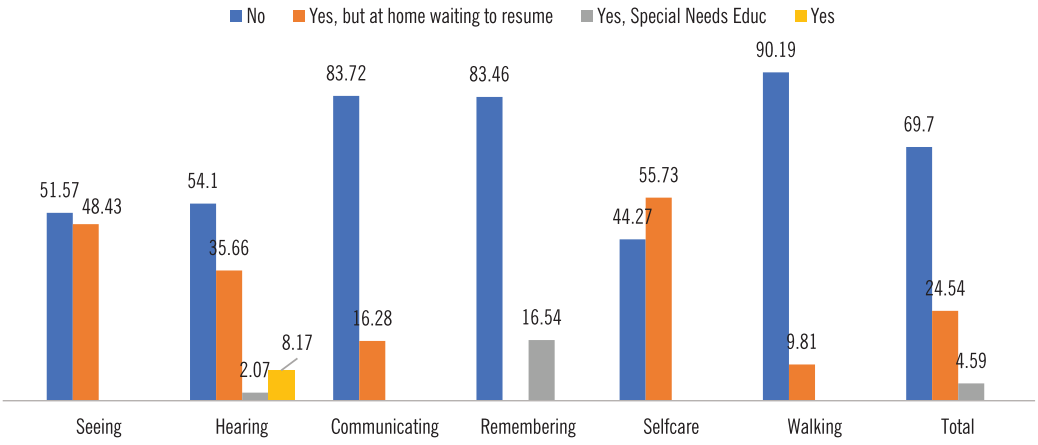
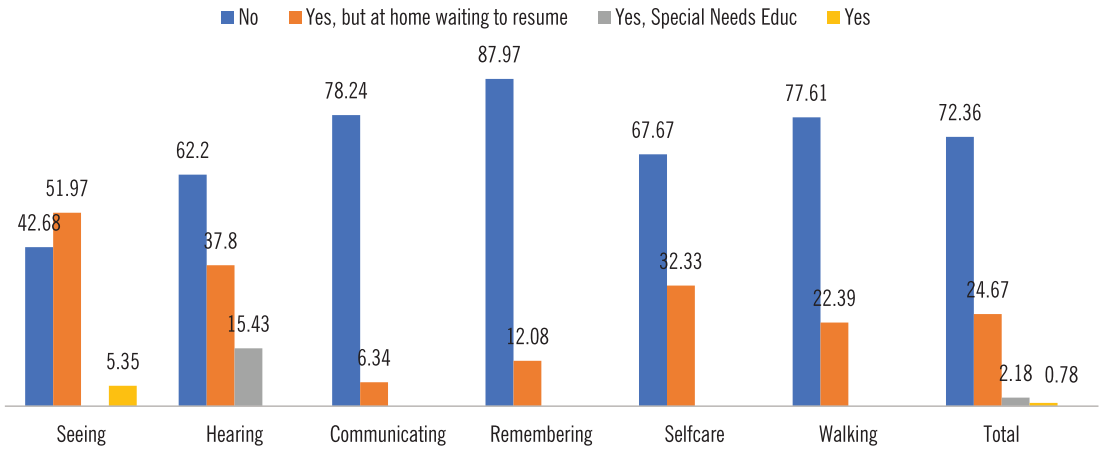


Figure 7 Percentage of male PWDs aged 14 to 17 years in school.



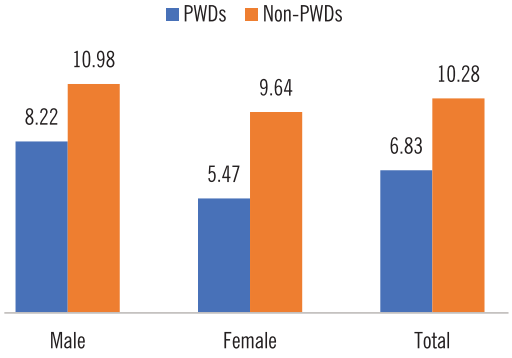
disabilities.

Gender gaps in education attainment by PWDs:

Female PWDS have a lower education attainment than their male counterparts. Specifically, Figure 8 shows that the average years of education for female PWDs is 5.47 years compared to 8.2 years for disabled men. This reflects a significant gender gap in schooling between disabled women and men. Previous research shows that such disparities in education attainment among PWDs stem from a combination of gender-based societal norms and discriminatory practices, limiting educational opportunities for disabled women (Al-Ghaib et al., 2017).[9] These obstacles may include cultural biases, unequal access to resources, lack of transportation and systemic gender and disability-related barriers that hinder educational attainment for disabled women. Similar findings from the 2018 UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) report revealed that in almost all the 49 countries in the study, disabled women have fewer years of schooling than disabled men, and because of this, they end up suffering doubly by virtue of not only being disabled but also female (UIS, 2018).[10] Furthermore, overall, PWDs have lower (6.83 years) schooling on average compared to non-PWDs (10.28 years). This is mainly attributed to limited access to inclusive programs, segregation and discrimination, the inability to cover school fees, delays in joining school, and the lack of assistive devices (ICED, 2023; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2019).[11]

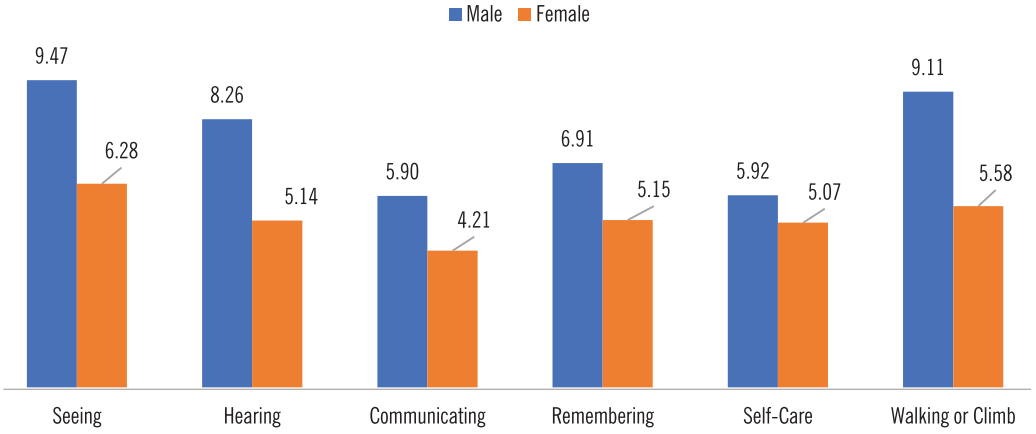
As expected, the type of disability matters for overall education attainment. Figure 9 shows the distribution of average years of schooling attained by the nature of disability. It is indicated that PWDs with communication and self-care difficulties have the lowest average years of education. Within these categories, the years of schooling are lower among females than males. Specifically, the

Figure 8 Average years of education attained among the 18-64 years old (completed years of schooling)



gender difference in the average schooling attained among those with communicating difficulties is 1.69 years (5.90 years for males and 4.21 years for females) and 0.85 years for those with self-care difficulties. Figure 8 also shows that there is a significant gap in the years of schooling between females and males with walking, seeing, and hearing disabilities. On average, females with walking, seeing and hearing have three years less schooling than their male counterparts. The 2018 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report states that impairments affecting one's ability to interact and communicate with others impose significant obstacles to participation in education, both practically and socially. As a result, individuals with self-care and communication difficulties have the least years of schooling (GEM, 2018).[12]

Figure 9 Average education attained among PWDs aged 18-64 years by disability type, 2021 (years)



Source: Author's construction using the 2021 NLFS data

Emerging Policy actions

Given the declining trends in employment, especially for female PWDs, the Government should create a more inclusive job market that embraces the potential and capabilities of disabled women for greater economic empowerment and improved representation of PWDs in employment. The following policy areas can be taken for policy consideration to tackle this continued decline in employment among PWDs

a) Gender-responsive economic policies: There is a need to formulate and implement gender-inclusive policies by developing policies that specifically address the gender-based economic disparities faced by disabled women, aiming to bridge the pay gap and enhance their economic empowerment.

b) Formal sector inclusion as well as the expansion of formal sector opportunities: Encourage the formal employment of disabled women through targeted initiatives, providing incentives for businesses to employ PWDs and ensuring workplace accommodations for their unique needs.

c) Accessible Workplace Accommodations and Mandatory Workplace Modifications: Enforce regulations mandating workplaces to accommodate the needs of PWDs, including disabled women, to improve their productivity and facilitate their seamless integration into the workforce.

d) Inclusive education policies aimed at enhancing educational accessibility: Develop policies and allocate resources to ensure the inclusion of school-age PWDs, particularly focusing on those with specific disabilities, to improve their access to education and enable a more inclusive and accessible learning environment.

e) Financial support and subsidies for assistive devices: Provide financial support and subsidies for assistive and mobility devices, making them more affordable and accessible for PWDs, thus empowering them to engage more actively in both education and employment.

f) Conduct public awareness and sensitization campaigns: Launch comprehensive public awareness campaigns to challenge societal attitudes and stereotypes towards disabled women, promoting a more inclusive and accepting society.

g) Capacity Building and Training: There is a need to offer training programs to educators and employers, focusing on disability awareness and inclusive practices to enhance the inclusion and retention of PWDs, particularly disabled women, in educational and professional settings.

h) There is also a need for a two-pronged approach that first increases access to school/ education for PWDs and then puts in place systems to help prevent PWDs from lagging in school or dropping out.

By implementing these policies, Uganda can create an enabling environment that empowers disabled women, ultimately leading to their enhanced economic and social integration.

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