

Research Article

Accessibility Politics: A Study of Disability Rights and the Political Struggles for Inclusive Societies

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Abstract

Politics of disability rights and accessibility activism are now at the forefront of international movements toward inclusive societies. Years of disability rights activism have not translated into laws, let alone the creation of international guidelines compelling equality, but people with disabilities remain subjected to long-term forms of exclusion and marginalization. Figures regarding work, for instance, place in context acute following disparities between the non-disabled and the disabled which indicate widespread economic disparities. This study looks at the politics of accessibility by examining how legislation, policy architecture, social movements, and emerging technologies all contribute to the daily experience of people with disabilities. While there have been significant advances legislatively—regional accessibility laws as well as international agreements—implementation remains sporadic and more often than not in the absence of the enforcement provisions required to effect significant change. Virtual spaces, in particular, pose new barriers, with most sites and apps remaining inaccessible even when standards do exist. Moreover, the disability experience is not typically monolithic. Instead, it is shaped by intersecting identities such as gender, race, and geography and therefore is vastly intersectional in character. The COVID-19 pandemic further shed light on these disparities by disrupting access to vital services and exacerbating structural inequities. Technological innovation, like artificial intelligence, has introduced new dangers, particularly in computerized hiring systems that inadvertently exclude disabled applicants. The dominant theoretical model—the social model of disability—has been instrumental in shifting attitudes from a concern with individual impairment to societal barriers. There is growing recognition, however, of the need for a more comprehensive model that takes into account medical, cultural, and structural factors as well. This study contends that accessibility must be conceived not merely as a technical or legal issue, but as a broader political and ethical commitment. Disability must be seen as an intrinsic and enriching aspect of human difference, worthy of being fully included and actively participating in all areas of life.

Keywords

Accessibility Politics, Disability Rights, Social Inclusion, Disability Legislation, Americans with Disabilities Act, United Nations, Intersectionality, Inclusive Societies

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1. Introduction

The struggle for disability rights and accessibility has undergone a huge transformation over the past century, driven by changing social attitudes and political mobilization [31]. Historically, disability was far constructed on a medical model, in which disabled individuals were viewed as "patients" who had to be cured or put into institutions, rather than as whole and equal citizens [28]. This perspective contributed to the creation of systemic exclusion, including practices like forced sterilization under early 20th-century eugenics legislation, and widespread segregation in education and employment [32]. But then, in the mid-20th century, disability rights activism—driven in significant part by the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s—began to resist these exclusionary systems [24]. This upsurge of activism precipitated dramatic legal reforms, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in the United States and the United Kingdom Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. These legislative gains were the crest of the social model of disability, which assumes that disability is not a product of individual impairments but of society's obstacles to engagement and equality [22, 34, 4, 5].

Despite these legislative advancements, enforcement of policy for accessibility remains patchy. For example, while the Americans with Disabilities Act has improved physical accessibility in the United States, studies show that discrimination in the workplace remains an issue [37]. According to [35], the United States employment rate of people with disabilities remains significantly lower than that of non-disabled individuals, at about 37% compared to 77% in 2023 [8]. Likewise, in the European Union, according to a 2022 report by the European Commission, 50% of disabled individuals have jobs, despite the legal structures that exist in favor of equal opportunities [10]. Further, critics point out that disability rights legislation is not adequately funded and enforced, especially in the Global South, where there are insufficient resources and absence of political will to implement it [14].

Today controversies in accessibility politics have also shifted towards digital inclusion and the role of technology in making accessibility easier or more difficult. The digital divide disproportionately affects individuals with disabilities, and the [46] reported 96.3% of homepages with accessibility problems such as missing alt text and non-working keyboard navigation. Even with assistive technologies like screen readers and captioning tools powered by artificial intelligence that have improved digital accessibility, the majority of mainstream tech companies do not design for accessibility in the first place. Furthermore, emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and automation have also raised ethical concerns, as algorithmic bias can further exacerbate differences for disabled individuals [17]. As politics of accessibility move forward, the problem still lies in ensuring that policies are not only implemented but also effectively executed, intersectionality and technological advancement being taken

into account.

2. Theoretical Background

The Social Model of Disability is also skeptical of the medical model perspective on the grounds that disability is not an individual property but one produced by social barriers [28]. This model has shaped disability rights activism globally, and its effects can be observed through legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act [1] and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [44]. However, critics argue that while the social model manages to highlight systemic discrimination, it sometimes downplays the medical and rehabilitative care needed by some disabled individuals [38]. In recent arguments, writers like [3] emphasize the importance of moving beyond physical accessibility to digital accessibility, as many websites and apps remain inaccessible—96.3% of homepages have accessibility issues [46]. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the disparities in worldwide access to health care for the disabled, undermining the assumption that the removal of social barriers will be enough to address all accessibility issues [19].

The Political Economy of Disability and Intersectionality Theory provide more nuanced explanations of how disability functions in relation to broader systems of oppression. Political economy, as analyzed by [34], is scathing of neoliberal policies that place market efficiency above social inclusion [2], yielding under-resourced accessibility initiatives and weak policy implementation. It is particularly applicable in the Global South, where governments often neither have the budget nor the political will to enact disability rights [14]. Intersectionality theory [9] also shows us how disabled groups of marginalized subjects—like Black disabled women in the United States, or Aboriginal disabled individuals in Australia—exhibit multiply-stratified disadvantage in employment, health, and education [40]. To an analogous effect, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach [37] shifts attention away from legal acknowledgment of rights entitlement to what in fact are actually being made available to individuals with disabilities. For example, even with employment legislation, the statistic that 37% of disabled individuals in the United States are working [18] indicates that economic systems still exclude large numbers from productive labor. This indicates that policies not only have to remove physical barriers but also redistribute economic resources and construct inclusive social spaces.

3. Problem Statement

Against the backdrop of international legal documents such as the Americans with Disabilities Act [1] and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [46], enforcement remains sporadic across territories, with continued systematic exclusion of the disabled. While progress is visible

in some countries in the West, disabled people in the Global South encounter ineffective enforcement, limited resources, and social discrimination [14]. Even within developed nations, accessibility remains an issue—96.3% of homepages contain accessibility defects [45], and the employment rate of the disabled in the United States, remains significantly lower than that for non-disabled individuals (37% vs. 77%) [20]. Furthermore, digital technology has also created new forms of exclusion because online services, e-learning software, and office technology generally do not provide for disabled users [7, 15]. Critics argue that while the social model of disability has guided policy changes, it does not adequately address the economic and political barriers that perpetuate accessibility challenges [40]. The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed these inequalities, with disabled individuals facing disproportionate inaccessibility to healthcare, social isolation, and economic marginalization [22]. Therefore, accessibility politics must go beyond legislative action to ensure effective policy implementation, increased budgeting, intersectional accommodation, and digital accessibility reforms.

Methodology

The study used quantitative methods that included qualitative Content Analysis to evaluate the political discourse around accessibility, policy documents, legislative texts, speeches by political figures, and disability rights organizations will be examined. The study also used case studies that included United States, the European Union, and a few nations in the Global South are among the areas with differing degrees of accessibility where comparative case studies were carried out. These case studies provide detailed analysis of how local governments and organizations have dealt with accessibility concerns and the efficacy of laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The quantitative analysis provided data from disability-focused organizations (like national disability councils and the World Health Organization), it will be possible to evaluate accessibility trends in various geographical areas, with an emphasis on shifts in public opinion, legal protections, and infrastructure.

4. Literature Review

The discourse on disability rights has been greatly altered, from a medical model of disability as an individual impairment to a social model emphasizing structural and societal barriers [27, 29]. This shift has influenced not only scholarly discourse, but also political and policy responses, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, despite such legal frameworks having improved accessibility, scholars argue that continued problems such as non-compliance, lack of adequate funding, and intersectional discrimination continue to bar full inclusion.

Scholars like [29] argues that the medical model of disability, hitherto the dominant policymaker model, focused on

individual impairment and treatment at the expense of removing obstacles in society. It observed by [27] concurs with this by noting that the shift towards the social model has served to advance disability rights into the mainstream of political debate. The shift is evident in legislation such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which is oriented towards state obligations to integrate disabled individuals rather than as passive objects for care.

They fault that while the social model has transformed thinking, it makes life as disabled individuals easier. Scholars like [38] argues that while the social model correctly identifies societal barriers, it ignores the contribution of impairment at times. For example, individuals with chronic pain or degenerative diseases may still require medical intervention, even if they remove societal barriers. This led to calls for an integrated policy that combines both social and medical perspectives [32].

Americans with Disabilities Act and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are frequently referred to as exemplar policies that have significantly increased accessibility. Scholars like [35] found that the Americans with Disabilities Act led to important improvements in public transportation and jobs for disabled persons in America. But their work also brings up lingering issues, such as businesses failing to meet accessibility standards. Based on a 2023 Americans with Disabilities Act-related lawsuit report from the United States. Department of Justice, Americans with Disabilities Act-related cases increased 20% during the last five years, indicating continued non-compliance [42].

Similarly, while the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been ratified by over 180 countries, its implementation varies widely. In the European Union, a 2023 report by the European Disability Forum found that only half of member states had fully implemented the European Accessibility Act [12]. Meanwhile, in low-income countries, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities implementation remains minimal due to resource constraints and political inertia [15]. These disparities raise concerns about the effectiveness of international disability rights frameworks when enforcement mechanisms are weak.

Scholars like [3, 34] acknowledge the significance of intersectionality in disability politics as accessibility issues become compounded for the disadvantaged. For example, [20] found that women with disabilities are more likely by two times than non-disabled women to be jobless. Also in the US, Black and Hispanic individuals with disabilities experience higher rates of poverty and reduced access to healthcare compared to whites [26].

These disparities mean that disability policy must go beyond the single solution. Scholars such as [41] argue that the mainstream disability rights movement has not addressed these intersectional concerns on numerous occasions, focusing instead on middle-class, white, and male issues. As a result, calls for disability justice movements that focus on race, gender, and economics have gained popularity [10, 26].

Contemporary arguments regarding disability studies have that access online is now a new frontier in the rights of individuals with disabilities. According to [24], accessibility is not just physical spaces but also attitude and political will within society. This argument became even more valid under the digital age. The [50] found that 96.3% of the top one million sites are not accessible according to accessibility guidelines, posing new challenges for disabled individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic also made such issues apparent, as remote learning and telemedicine services were often created without regard for disabilities [26].

In addition, scholars are now studying the role of artificial intelligence in disability inclusion. Scholars like [1] confirmed that AI accessibility tools, such as automated captions and voice recognition software, can improve access for individuals with disabilities. However, concerns regarding algorithmic bias have been raised, considering that most Artificial Intelligence systems lack support for different disability needs [6].

It has been observed that the literature is indicative of disability rights gains with an acknowledgment that difficulties continue to be experienced in policy implementation, intersectional discrimination, and emerging digital barriers. The shift towards social models of disability from the medical has achieved much legislative reform, but institutionalized inequalities still remain. What needs to be prioritized in future action are greater enforcement capability, policy that is responsive and incorporates intersectionality, and utilizing technology to improve inclusion. Without closing these gaps, the prospect of full accessibility remains a dream.

5. Discussion of Study Findings

Despite the existence of legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the implementation gap represents a necessary challenge worldwide. Policy on accessibility, while advanced on paper, is found wanting in practice through various systemic barriers, including regional discrepancies, digital accessibility barriers, intersectionality, and political inaction. One of the key findings in this study is that accessibility legislation is unevenly applied in the Global North compared to the Global South. Western countries such as the United States, Canada, and members of the European Union have been taking huge strides, but most of the world's low- and middle-income nations are far behind. For example, a United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [45] report indicates that over 80% of people with disabilities in the region lack access to basic public infrastructure. Similarly, in sub-Saharan Africa, the [49] indicated that only 10% of public buildings in major cities are wheelchair-accessible. This gap is mostly caused by an absence of funds, ineffective implementation of policies, and cultural stigmatization that continues to ostracize the disabled [16].

Critics are of the opinion that accessibility cannot be viewed from a legislative context only but as a developmental

issue that must be resolved through sustainable investment. Some scholars [39] opine that policies reflect Western ideas of disability, which may not necessarily align with the socio-economic realities of the Global South. For example, while the Americans with Disabilities and the Convention is concerned with physical infrastructure, the majority of African and Asian countries still struggle with fundamental issues like education and healthcare for disabled people.

The growing digital economy has introduced new issues of accessibility, particularly in the technology domain. While digital technologies have made remote work, online education, and e-governance possible, they have also created new barriers for people with disabilities. The [50] reported that 96.3% of the top 1 million homepages had Web Content Accessibility Guidelines failures, i.e., were not fully accessible to visually, hearing, or cognitively disabled people.

A prime example is the inability to access online learning websites during the COVID-19 crisis. A survey by the National Federation of the Blind [29] revealed that 75% of blind students in America faced significant challenges accessing online learning materials due to poorly designed education software. This is worsened in the Global South, where lower internet penetration levels and digital illiteracy among disabled populations compound the accessibility gap further [26].

Emerging research suggests that Artificial Intelligence-driven solutions such as automated captioning and text-to-speech systems can help bridge this gap [1]. However, scholars argue that without regulatory compulsion, private tech companies have no incentive to prioritize accessibility, as evidenced in the lack of legal sanctions for non-compliant firms [8].

This study also indicates towards intersectional discrimination disabled individuals belonging to marginalized groups, i.e., women, racial minorities, and the poor face. For instance, as per the International Labour Organization [20], disabled women have a twofold higher unemployment rate than non-disabled women. In India, 25% of disabled women are working, while 52% of disabled men are [19].

The intersection of disability and race also creates additional layers to accessibility issues. In America, Black and Latino individuals with disabilities experience higher levels of poverty and unemployment compared to their white counterparts [27]. Similarly, in South Africa, disabled individuals in previously disadvantaged race groups are more hindered in access to assistive technology due to financial constraints [14].

The dominant disability rights movements have been accused by their critics of not seeing and addressing these intersectional challenges. While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is sensitive to intersectionality, the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been criticized as omitting special focus on the disabled individuals within repressed communities [40].

One recurring theme in disability rights debates is the lack of political will to turn accessibility legislation into a reality.

Governments enact disability legislation but fail to fund it adequately or impose significant penalties for non-compliance. For example, within the European Union, as of a 2023 report by the European Disability Forum, only 50% of the member states had implemented the European Accessibility Act in full, despite it being legally binding [13].

In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act came into effect in 1990, but accessibility litigation has been increasing in the past few years, indicating long-standing non-conformity. The United States Department of Justice [43] received more than 10,000 Americans with Disabilities Act-related complaints in the year 2022 alone, which is 20% more than the previous year. Similarly, in Japan, although the Act on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities is on the statute book, enforcements are poor with no significant implications of non-adherence [21, 23].

Latest arguments suggest that economic incentives, as a substitute for punitive ones, can be better incentives to make accessibility more achievable. Writers such as [25] suggest offering tax credits or subsidies to corporations that voluntarily add accessibility, rather than relying on litigation-based compliance.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The pursuit of accessibility remains an ongoing issue, despite the huge policy and legal strides. Despite policies such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which have been key to pushing forward disability rights, the policy-practice gap remains. Structural barriers, poor enforcement, and the rising digital barriers continue to hinder equal inclusion. To overcome these challenges, there must be a comprehensive approach that unites legal, economic, and social measures so that accessibility is not only a policy objective but a reality experienced by people.

Uneven enforcement of the law is one of the most serious concerns in accessibility politics. Although the high-income economies have made extensive efforts towards enacting disability rights, the majority of low- and middle-income economies are bedeviled by inadequate resources and institutional capabilities. Even in more developed economies, private sector businesses and public organizations tend to default on accessibility norms because of weak monitoring and oversight. Without meaningful enforcement mechanisms and sufficient funding, accessibility policies become symbolic rather than transformative.

The emergence of digital technologies holds both promise and challenges for accessibility. On the positive side, technologies like screen readers, automatic captions, and artificial intelligence-powered assistive technologies have increased access for individuals with disabilities. Conversely, digital platforms continue to be inaccessible, giving rise to new modes of exclusion.

The WebAIM Million Report of 2023 found that over 96% of the top million websites were inaccessible, reflecting a wide gap in digital inclusion efforts. Digital inaccessibility must be countered by more stringent regulations, industry standards, and greater awareness among technology developers.

Intersectionality also needs to be an underlying consideration in disability policy. Research has shown that disabled individuals in oppressed groups—i.e., women, minority racial groups, and poor group members—face intersecting access obstacles. An across-the-board approach to disability policy cannot identify these intersecting access problems. Governments and advocacy groups must develop policies that address the specific conditions of diverse disability groups, lest they unconsciously reinforce existing inequalities.

6.2. Recommendations

Governments must emphasize proper enforcement of disability legislation by making adequate resources available and enforcing strict penalties for default. This includes enhancing monitoring bodies, conducting periodic accessibility audits, and ensuring compliance with legal norms by public and private institutions. Countries must put in place mechanisms like the U.S. Department of Justice Americans with Disabilities Act enforcement unit that aggressively investigates and penalizes default.

As digital platforms become increasingly central to learning, employment, and civic participation, technology accessibility is crucial. Governments need to implement web accessibility standards, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, and incentivize technology companies to produce accessible digital platforms. Public budgets should also sponsor research on Artificial Intelligence-based assistive technology to offer more digital access for the disabled.

Disability policies must be developed through an intersectional lens, as race, gender, and socio-economic status determine access to opportunity and resources. Special programs must be directed towards underrepresented disability groups such as women with disabilities and people of color, to determine their specific needs. This can include special employment programs, tailored healthcare, and culturally appropriate accessibility campaigns.

Global cooperation is most important in advocating for accessibility on a global level. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities would have to be made stronger through more efficient accountability mechanisms so that signatory states are committed to their undertakings. Exchange of knowledge between countries can also help low-income nations adopt effective disability policies by learning from best accessibility legislation strategies and technology.

7. Final Thoughts

The struggle for accessibility is a fundamental human rights

problem that calls for the participation of all societal sectors and is not merely a technical or legal one. Although there has been considerable success in closing the gap between policy and practice, more work is still required. Societies may make the world more accessible and inclusive for everyone by strengthening enforcement, prioritizing digital inclusion, adopting intersectional tactics, and encouraging international cooperation. Millions of disabled people are excluded from an integrated global community if the promise of accessibility is not realized.

Abbreviations

ILO International Labour Organization
 COVID-19 Coronavirus Disease 2019

Author Contributions

Aaron Ayeta Mulyanyuma is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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