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Barriers to Permanent Residency and the Exclusion of Disabled Migrants in Canada: Rethinking Canadian Immigration Through Critical Perspectives on Disability and Social Work

Obstacles à la résidence permanente et exclusion des migrantes et migrants handicapés au Canada : repenser l'immigration canadienne à partir de perspectives critiques sur le handicap et le travail social

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Abstract

Canada's immigration system prioritizes economic utility when selecting permanent residents, systematically excluding disabled migrants. Disabled migrants, despite the opportunity to be recruited as migrant workers, face more compounded barriers embedded in neoliberal immigration policy, nation-state border enforcement, and systemic ableism when they apply for permanent residency. This paper situates medical inadmissibility provisions within the broader critiques of neoliberalism and disability, showing how disabled migrants are positioned as economic liabilities rather than social and cultural contributors. Situated within critical perspectives on disability and anti-oppressive social work, we integrate ecological theory to examine how justice should be promoted for migrants with disabilities across micro, mezzo, and macro levels. We argue that social workers must recognize both their complicity in state-aligned systems and their potential role in resisting exclusion by collaborating with disabled migrants and disability justice movements. The paper concludes with recommendations for disability-inclusive immigration reform and concrete strategies for social workers and researchers to contest neoliberal ableism and advance migrant and disability justice in Canada.

Résumé

Le système d'immigration canadien accorde la priorité à l'utilité économique dans la sélection des résidentes et résidents permanents, ce qui entraîne l'exclusion systématique des personnes migrantes handicapées. Même si ces dernières peuvent être recrutées comme travailleuses et travailleurs migrants, elles se heurtent à des obstacles encore plus nombreux lorsqu'elles présentent une demande de résidence permanente, obstacles enracinés dans les politiques d'immigration néolibérales, la protection des frontières par l'État-nation et le capacitisme systémique. Cet article inscrit les dispositions relatives à l'interdiction de territoire pour motifs sanitaires dans le cadre plus large des critiques du néolibéralisme et du handicap, et met en lumière la manière dont les migrantes et migrants handicapés sont perçus comme des fardeaux économiques plutôt que reconnus pour leurs contributions sociales et culturelles. Ancrés dans des perspectives critiques sur le handicap et le travail social antioppressif, nous mobilisons la théorie écologique afin d'examiner la façon dont la justice devrait être renforcée pour les migrantes et migrants handicapés d'un point de vue micro, mezzo et macro. Nous soutenons que les travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux doivent reconnaître à la fois leur complicité dans les structures étatiques et leur rôle potentiel dans la résistance à l'exclusion, en collaborant avec les personnes handicapées migrantes et les mouvements pour la justice pour les personnes handicapées. L'article se conclut par des recommandations pour une réforme de l'immigration qui inclut les personnes handicapées, ainsi que par des stratégies concrètes permettant aux actrices et acteurs du travail social et de la recherche de contester le capacitisme néolibéral et de faire progresser la justice migrante et la justice pour les personnes handicapées au Canada.

Key words

Disability; Immigration Policy; Medical Inadmissibility; Permanent Residency; Social Work Advocacy

Mots-clés

Handicap; politique d'immigration; interdiction de territoire pour motifs sanitaires; résidence permanente; plaidoyer en travail social.

Introduction

In recent years, Canada has witnessed a notable increase in its population of non-permanent residents, growing from approximately two million (2,052,904) in the second quarter of 2023 to nearly three million (2,903,415) by mid-2024 (Statistics Canada, 2025). Among these, 1.37 million non-permanent residents were work permit holders (Statistics Canada, 2025), including migrant workers who play a vital role in supporting key sectors such as the agri-food and healthcare systems (Macklin, 2024; Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, 2020). Migrant workers are often perceived as valuable human capital contributing to Canada’s social and economic development (Akbar, 2022). In recognition of these contributions, Canada has developed various pathways to permanent residency through both provincial and federal programs. These include occupation-specific programs in each province, such as Saskatchewan’s Worker with Saskatchewan Work Experience, as well as federal pathways like the Express Entry – Federal Skilled Worker program (Government of Canada, 2025b; Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.). Such programs are largely structured around a point-based system that evaluates applicants on criteria such as education, age, and work experience, with additional points awarded for high-demand occupations (Banerjee et al., 2024). Underpinning these pathways is a neoliberal framework that prioritizes economic utility, evaluating migrants primarily on their perceived labour-market value rather than equity and inclusion (Blower, 2016; Cook-Martín, 2024).

Despite the existence of diverse immigration pathways, not all migrants have equal access to permanency. Migrants with disabilities face additional systemic barriers in obtaining permanent residency largely due to Canada’s medical inadmissibility policies (Ahmed, 2017; Badu-Boateng, 2020). These policies allow Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to deny permanent residency to applicants whose health conditions are deemed a risk to public health or place an “excessive demand” on social services (Government of Canada, 2025a). The criteria are vague, inconsistently applied, and rarely account for social or cultural context. At the same time, the “healthy immigrant/migrant effect” describes how im/migrants often arrive in Canada with better-than-average health but experience a decline in health due to systemic inequities in the host country (Deng, 2020; Morassaei et al., 2022). As migrants stay longer in the host country, stressors such as limited access to healthcare, substance use (e.g., smoking), and the absence of culturally responsive services all contribute to their deteriorated health (Blair & Schneeberg, 2014; Elshahat et al., 2022; Morassaei et al., 2022). For many, this deterioration places them at a disadvantage when applying for permanent residency. Specifically, migrants’ health may change over time, yet Canada’s immigration system fails to consider these changes and instead penalizes those who acquire disabilities or chronic health conditions, reinforcing ableist assumptions that disability equates to dependency and burden (Blower, 2016).

Some high-profile cases illustrate how medical inadmissibility has been used to deny residency to migrants with disabilities or those with disabled family members. Brohman (2017) described how the Warkentin family, who migrated to Canada from the United States, were denied permanent residency due to their daughter's suspected healthcare needs, despite evidence that her care would not impose a financial burden on the Canadian healthcare system. Similarly, a tenured professor at York University in Ontario was denied permanent residency due to his son's Down syndrome, despite longstanding contributions to Canadian society (CBC News, 2016). These cases demonstrate how disability is equated with burden and how economic criteria become the sole evaluation standard for the permanent residency application, as the applicant's other contributions are not considered (Alhussainy, 2024; MacIntosh, 2019). This situation reflects systemic ableism within Canadian immigration policy.

Rejections based on medical inadmissibility raise profound justice concerns, as Canada continues to benefit from the labour and investments of migrants while simultaneously denying them legal recognition and a pathway to permanency. Economic criteria, imposed by the Canadian government, often override principles of equity and inclusion, devaluing disabled migrants by treating them as potential costs rather than contributors (El-Lahib, 2015; El-Lahib & Wehbi, 2012). This reflects the hegemonic power of the Canadian nation-state, which positions itself as benevolent while drawing boundaries around who qualifies as a desirable citizen based on health, productivity, and economic value (Alhussainy, 2024; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024). Migrants with disabilities are

especially vulnerable due to their precarious immigration status (Spagnuolo et al., 2020).

Without the full rights of permanent residents or citizens, pursuing justice, such as appealing an immigration decision, can place migrants at risk of rejection or deportation and further cause health and mental health issues (Brabant & Raynault, 2012; Spagnuolo et al., 2020). In addition, while some cases attract media attention (e.g., Brohman, 2017; CBC News, 2016), many remain hidden as applicants might stay silent due to fear, stigma, or legal insecurity.

This paper draws on critical disability studies (CDS) and anti-oppressive social work to conceptually examine how neoliberalism, nation-state logics, and systemic ableism intersect in Canadian immigration policy. CDS provides a reflexive and theoretically grounded lens for understanding disability as socially constructed, relational, and shaped by historical, cultural, and political contexts, rather than as an individual deficit or medical condition (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Emerging as a maturing field within disability studies, CDS distinguishes itself from earlier applications of the term, which were taken up within rehabilitation and special education (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Informed by post-structural and critical social theory, CDS emphasizes social, cultural, and human rights-based models of disability (Korntheuer et al., 2021).

Consistent with this perspective, CDS challenges binary notions of disability and instead highlights disability as a continuum that reflects the diversity of human life, shaped by social attitudes, policies, and environments (Burghardt et al., 2021; Korntheuer et al., 2021). Anti-oppressive social work complements this framework by centring analyses of

power, oppression, and structural inequality across multiple contexts, including family, communities, and policy systems, and by attending to how these dynamics shape lived experiences and access to resources (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). Together, CDS and anti-oppressive social work provide a theoretical foundation for examining the exclusion of disabled migrants within Canada's immigration system. Specifically, CDS offers tools to critically interrogate how disability is defined and operationalized within immigration policy, while anti-oppressive social work offers practice- and policy-oriented approaches for addressing systemic exclusion and advancing disability and migrant justice. Drawing on these frameworks, we write as scholars committed to disability and migrant justice, while acknowledging that social work itself occupies a contradictory position as both an arm of the neoliberal state and a potential site of resistance. Through this critical conceptual analysis, we argue that Canada's immigration system systematically devalues disabled migrants and reinforces exclusionary boundaries around them. We further explore how social workers, collaborating with allied advocates and migrants with disabilities, can advance both disability justice and migrant justice in this in-between space, shaped by the neoliberal agenda and professional resistance. As disability language continues to evolve without a universal consensus, we use both person-first (e.g., migrant with a disability) and identity-first (e.g., disabled migrant) language throughout this paper to reflect varying preferences within disability communities (American Psychological Association, 2015). The following section begins by introducing Canada's neoliberal immigration framework and its role in shaping perceptions of disabled migrants' value and work.

Migrants in Canada’s Neoliberal Economy

Neoliberalism lacks a singular definition but broadly refers to a shift in political, social, and economic systems in both the West and the world shaped by free-market principles (Hyslop, 2018; Venugopal, 2015). It emphasizes limited government intervention, privatization of services, and market-driven development (Toft, 2021; Venugopal, 2015). Neoliberalism gained prominence following the decline of Keynesian economics after the Second World War, as welfare systems were perceived as insufficient for stimulating economic growth (Joppke, 2024; Toft, 2021). By re-orienting economies toward supply-demand logic, neoliberalism was expected to stimulate growth and enhance profitability (Hyslop, 2018). In practice, Western governments reduced public funding for social services, pushing these sectors toward privatization and self-sufficiency (Cherry & Leotti, 2025). On a global scale, neoliberalism has expanded alongside globalization, reinforcing the dominance of the Global North over developing regions (Cornelissen, 2025). The Global North commonly refers to the Western, industrialized countries and is also used to describe the dominance of whiteness and Eurocentrism, whereas the Global South generally refers to countries in Africa, Asia, and South America that have historically been positioned as “others” in relation to Western “norms” (Sims, 2024). These terms are commonly used to discuss social and economic inequalities within a global neoliberal context. For instance, international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund contributed to the dominance of the Global North by embedding developing countries in

the Global South within market systems shaped by neoliberal Western interests (Rustin & Massey, 2015).

In Canada, the influence of neoliberalism is especially visible in immigration policy, where migrants are assessed primarily for their perceived productivity and ability to address labour shortages in key sectors such as healthcare and agriculture (Akbar, 2022; Cook-Martín, 2024). Migrant workers, often from the Global South, are issued temporary permits to fill roles that Canadian workers avoid due to low wages or poor working conditions (Macklin, 2024). This flow of labour reflects entrenched power imbalances: Canada positions itself as a humanitarian nation in the Global North (Banerjee et al., 2024), while simultaneously benefiting from the precarity of migrant workers from the Global South (Cook-Martín, 2024). Migrant workers are often positioned as “cheap labour,” and their temporary legal status compounds vulnerability to exploitation (Mooten, 2021). Previous reports highlight poor living and working conditions, racial discrimination, and threats of deportation faced by them (Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, 2020). For migrant workers with disabilities, these vulnerabilities are intensified by inaccessible workplaces, inadequate accommodations, and restricted access to healthcare or supports (Blower, 2016; Wong, 2012).

These vulnerabilities are not incidental but deliberately embedded in Canada’s neoliberal immigration and labour policies, which prioritize economic utility over worker rights or long-term integration (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Migrants are selected, retained, or excluded based on their ability to generate economic returns (Triadafilopoulos & Taylor,

2024). This logic extends into permanent residency pathways, where applicants are evaluated for their profitability to the state (El-Lahib & Wehbi, 2012; Walsh, 2011). Applicants must meet criteria, including medical examinations, that align with neoliberal aims to minimize costs and maximize “return on investment” in human capital (Ahmed, 2017). For disabled migrants, these measures reproduce ableist assumptions that equate disability with dependency, deficit, and unproductivity (Spagnuolo, 2019).

As the literature suggests, this framing reduces disabled people to their economic potential while erasing their diverse social, cultural, and community contributions (Blower, 2016; MacIntosh, 2019). Social work, too, has been implicated in masking disability perspectives under the guise of “care” or “help”, often aligning with neoliberal logics and oppressive practices rather than challenging them (El-Lahib, 2020). For disabled migrants, exclusion through medical inadmissibility is therefore systemic, rooted in an immigration system that defines belonging narrowly through productivity (MacIntosh, 2019; Spagnuolo, 2019). Propelled by neoliberal cost-efficiency and national self-interest, the Canadian nation-state further utilizes its power to reinforce ableist boundaries around who is allowed to stay.

Drawing the Line: Nation-State and Migrants with Disabilities

The nation-state refers to a sovereign political entity that governs through legal, political, and economic structures (Fulcher, 2000). In the era of globalization, the nation-state continues to exert power through border regulation, citizenship, and the allocation of rights

(Jaskulowski, 2017). Still, these functions have been profoundly influenced by neoliberalism (Nobe-Ghelani, 2017). For example, nation-states in the Global North often act together to pursue shared economic interests, extending their influence over less developed regions (Fulcher, 2000). Neoliberalism reinforces this structure by embedding nation-states within a global capitalist system, enabling them to expand influence and secure human capital at reduced cost (Nobe-Ghelani, 2017; Walsh, 2011). Immigration becomes one of the mechanisms through which these states access and control labour, while simultaneously drawing boundaries around who is permitted to remain (Joppke, 2021; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024).

In Canada, the nation-state exerts its authority by aligning immigration eligibility with national self-interest (McDonald, 2011). Entry criteria are framed through nationalistic and economic logics (Joppke, 2024), positioning immigration as part of Canada’s ongoing nation-building project (Cook-Martín, 2024). Under these circumstances, the Canadian government is on a constant search for immigrants who will fit its economic, social, and cultural agendas and contribute to sustaining its development (Banerjee et al., 2024; McDonald, 2011). While multiculturalism is promoted rhetorically, beneath this narrative, applicants are evaluated primarily through a cost-benefit lens (Bhuyan et al., 2017). The points-based system, which assesses age, work experience, language proficiency, and occupational category, demonstrates how neoliberalism has standardized immigration as a market-oriented process (Winter, 2024). Regular changes in high-demand occupations and emphasis on “Canadian experiences” underscore how the Canadian state actively

recalibrates “desirable” labour to meet shifting market needs (Akbar, 2022; Bhuyan et al., 2017). Restrictions on low-wage migrant workers in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program further highlight how economic pressures are managed through exclusionary immigration policy (Duhatschek, 2024). These examples illustrate the intertwining of neoliberal and nationalist logics, what Nobe-Ghelani (2017) terms “neoliberal nationalism”, through which the state redrew immigration boundaries to sustain economic and political priorities.

Migrants with disabilities face particularly acute forms of exclusion within this system (El-Lahib, 2020; El-Lahib & Wehbi, 2012). The hegemonic power of the Canadian state, shaped by neoliberal values, positions disability as “unfavourable,” reinforcing the view that disabled migrants represent economic liability rather than human or social contributors (Hanes, 2009). IRCC has extensive discretion to reject applicants whose health conditions are projected to create “excessive demand” on public services (Government of Canada, 2025a). These decisions are often made without transparent criteria, leaving ample room for subjective and ableist interpretation. The Warkentin family’s case illustrates this process (Brohman, 2017). Their daughter’s suspected attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which was never formally diagnosed, was cited as the basis for rejection, even though the family had invested in a business and provided evidence that no additional public services would be required. IRCC nonetheless concluded that she would constitute a burden, without providing cost estimates or justification. This reflects how disability is framed not through actual need or evidence but through projections rooted in ableist assumptions. Such decisions leave migrants with

disabilities in precarious positions, where limited status, reduced access to supports, and linguistic or cultural barriers compound their vulnerability (Spagnuolo et al., 2020; Wong, 2012). The result is systemic othering: disabled migrants are excluded as “outsiders” (Blower, 2016; Dela Cruz et al., 2022), even as Canada markets itself as an inclusive, humanitarian nation (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Triadafilopoulos & Taylor, 2024). By prioritizing neoliberal cost-efficiency over equity, the Canadian nation-state reinforces ableist boundaries that devalue disabled lives.

Ableism and the Exclusion of Disabled Migrants in Immigration Policy

Ableism refers to systemic discrimination against disabled people, rooted in assumptions that able-bodiedness is the norm and that disability is deficiency or deviance (El-Lahib, 2015, 2016). This framing individualizes disability as a “problem” rather than recognizing ableism as a structural force (Badu-Boateng, 2020; Spagnuolo, 2019). Ableism manifests interpersonally, through stigma, violence, and dismissal (Dammeyer & Chapman, 2018), and institutionally, through policies that marginalize disabled people while often excluding them from decision-making (McFadden & Downie, 2018). In immigration practices, ableism is particularly potent and can be easily seen in immigration policies. For instance, decision-makers are rarely disabled themselves and disability perspectives are largely absent from policy formation (Alhussainy, 2024; El-Lahib, 2020; McFadden & Downie, 2018). CDS provides a social justice-oriented framework for understanding disability and

the challenges faced by migrants with disabilities within the immigration system. For example, rather than viewing disability as an individual impairment that limits performance, this perspective emphasizes the influences of social, political, economic, and cultural contexts on how disability is constructed and valued (Korntheuer et al., 2021; Mannor & Needham, 2024). From this standpoint, disabled people’s contributions are frequently obscured by ableist assumptions embedded within institutional systems, including immigration policy. Applying a critical disability lens guides us to understand ableism as a structural force within Canada’s immigration system and provides a foundation for exploring pathways toward social justice and systemic change for migrants with disabilities.

Historically, Canadian immigration has been explicitly shaped by ableist and racist exclusions (El-Lahib, 2015). Early policies openly deployed terms such as “feeble-mindedness” and “imbeciles” to bar entry (MacIntosh, 2019), embedding ableism into the very foundations of immigration governance. While overt rhetoric has softened, contemporary policy continues to enact exclusion in covert ways (El-Lahib, 2020; MacIntosh, 2019). The points-based system, for instance, calculates applicants’ “value” not only through skills and credentials but also through projected costs to health and social services, thereby implicitly devaluing disabled bodies (Alhussainy, 2024).

Economic ableism operates in tandem with neoliberal logics (Ahmed, 2017). Neoliberalism reduces migrants to human capital, evaluating their potential profit in the long term (Winter, 2024). Within this framework, disabled migrants are deemed

unproductive or risky, lacking the “health prospects” to be economically useful (Capurri, 2018). The result is a form of exclusion that both reflects and reproduces systemic ableism, especially through policies such as medical inadmissibility (Alhussainy, 2024; Hanes, 2009). Moreover, these policies draw on Global North assumptions of health and ability, imposing Eurocentric norms on migrant populations (El-Lahib, 2016).

Consistent with this hegemonic state power, the discretionary power of immigration officials further compounds this dynamic (Hanes, 2009). Even when applicants provide evidence that their disability will not create an “excessive demand”, officials may interpret disability as risk (Capurri, 2018). The Warkentin case again exemplifies this. Despite assurances that their daughter would not require additional services, their application was denied (Brohman, 2017). El-Lahib (2016) notes that such outcomes drive applicants with non-apparent disabilities to conceal their conditions, fearing disclosure will result in rejection. This illustrates the structural precarity of disabled migrants who must negotiate their own health status under the surveillance of the nation-state. Nobe-Ghelani (2017) argues that such practices reinforce the insider/outsider binary and that migrants must prove their worth to the state to be accepted as insiders, while failure often confirms their status as outsiders. For migrants with disabilities, this process underscores not only systemic discrimination but also the contradictions of Canada’s self-image as an inclusive, rights-based nation (Ahmed, 2017). In other words, by embedding ableism within neoliberal immigration policy, the state reaffirms exclusionary hierarchies that devalue

disabled lives while maintaining a front of humanitarianism (Capurri, 2018; El-Lahib & Wehbi, 2012).

Discussion

Building on the above analyses, neoliberalism, the nation-state, and ableism together illustrate the systemic challenges faced by migrants with disabilities seeking permanent residency in Canada. Neoliberalism suggests how profit-driven logics in the global context shape immigration systems and reinforce exclusionary processes (Bhuyan et al., 2017). The Canadian nation-state then plays a central role in maintaining boundaries that designate migrants with disabilities as “others” deemed less desirable (Nobe-Ghelani, 2017; Winter, 2024; Wong, 2012). Ableism further reveals how these exclusions manifest in practice, as migrants with disabilities are framed as burdens and subjected to discriminatory interpretations of “medical inadmissibility” (Capurri, 2018). This integrative theoretical perspective extends social work literature by situating exclusion within broader global and institutional contexts, filling a gap where previous studies have prioritized individual lived experience (El-Lahib, 2015).

To resist these intersecting barriers, social workers must engage across micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. Drawing on ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we also emphasize that systemic conditions at each level are interconnected and evolve, and that social workers should develop solutions by considering each level and their interrelationships. In addition, while working towards an integrative effort of addressing

injustice faced by migrants with disabilities in immigration policy, social workers should also acknowledge the contradictions of working within a profession that is simultaneously complicit in neoliberal governance and committed to social justice, and explore different possibilities that can facilitate anti-oppressive practice and lead to positive immigration policy changes. It is worth noting that although anti-oppressive practice explicitly aims to challenge and dismantle oppressive systems and structures, such change cannot happen immediately (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). Anti-oppressive practice is therefore often grounded in a critical understanding of existing systems and carried out in incremental strategies that begin within current constraints (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). In practice, social workers frequently draw on insights from micro- and mezzo-level work to identify how oppression is produced and reproduced, using this knowledge to inform advocacy and intervention at the macro level, while changes at the macro level can, in turn, create conditions for shifts at the micro and mezzo levels (Zhao et al., 2024). In this way, ecological theory is not used here to preserve or optimize existing systems, but rather as an analytic framework that helps locate oppression across interconnected levels. Ecological theory can support anti-oppressive practice by revealing how structural forces operate across systems and by guiding strategies that contest, rather than merely adjust, systems and practices that reproduce exclusion (Wilson et al., 2025). Together, these strategies allow social workers to engage in praxis that is both structurally informed and justice-oriented, while remaining attentive to the realities of working within and against existing systems.

At the micro level, settlement social workers and others working directly with migrants with disabilities must build rapport to understand their lived experiences of navigating both disability and the immigration system. Sustainable channels (e.g., regular community outreach, disability-led non-profits) are needed to ensure that migrants' voices shape practice rather than being filtered through service providers. Social workers can accompany migrants in appeals following application rejections, not only offering emotional support but challenging ableist interpretations of "excessive demand." They can also assist in accessing healthcare, particularly for mental health stressors caused by precarious status and its impact on their permanent residency application. Through these engagements, social workers can both support individuals and document systemic barriers, creating knowledge that can inform service and policy change. Collaborating with academia may strengthen these efforts, for example, by applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem (e.g., work, neighbourhood) and mesosystem (e.g., connections between them), social workers and researchers can better analyze how everyday environments constrain or support disabled migrants.

At the mezzo level, social workers in policy analysis and advocacy, often alongside non-profit and disability justice organizations, can bring these concerns into national debates. Beyond petitions and meetings with members of parliament, strategies such as coalition-building with disability movements, litigation support, and amplifying migrants' testimonies in the media can contest discriminatory policies. These efforts push back against neoliberal framings of migrants with disabilities as "unprofitable" and create public

pressure for reform. Although resistance from the nation-state is likely, alliances between social workers, advocacy groups, and disabled migrants can form the foundation for long-term systemic change. This work aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) exosystem (e.g., policy, institutions) and macrosystem (e.g., values, norms), addressing exclusion at broader levels.

At the macro level, collaboration between social workers across the Global North and South is essential to decolonize understandings of disability and immigration. As Zhao et al. (2024) argue in relation to global mental health services, knowledge produced from the Global South should be recognized and further reshape global debates to strengthen decolonial efforts. Similarly, migrants lived experiences should inform international discussions on redefining “excessive demand.” For instance, global professional organizations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (2010) have already issued statements on disability. These platforms can be mobilized to contest ableist immigration policies transnationally. Here, Canadian social workers should not position themselves as speaking for migrants but as allies who use their institutional access to elevate disabled migrants’ voices within global forums.

In integrating micro, mezzo, and macro levels, sustainable efforts can be developed to advance justice for migrants with disabilities in the global context. This integrative approach is crucial because prior work has often focused either on micro-level interventions (e.g., medical models that pathologize disability) (Bunbury, 2019) or macro-level structural analysis (Wong, 2012), without bridging the two. Using ecological theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we show how multi-level systems are interconnected and change over time. Importantly, social workers must also remain reflexive about the tensions of their dual role as state-aligned service providers and advocates for marginalized groups (Hyslop, 2018).

Drawing on these three systems, we propose several strategies for consideration:

- For researchers: Document the lived experiences of disabled migrants navigating the permanent residency process using various research methods (e.g., participatory and arts-based methods) that centre their voices, not as subjects but as co-creators of knowledge. Researchers can further engage with migrants with disabilities at the stage of knowledge dissemination to raise public awareness of the hardships faced by this population.
- For social workers in practice: Develop programs in collaboration with disabled migrants that amplify their capacity to self-advocate and resist ableist interpretations of admissibility, while remaining reflexive about the contradictions of state-funded mandates. Within neoliberal agendas, social workers can remain flexible and utilize available resources to design different initiatives and programs to help migrants with disabilities. They should also explore ways to build solidarity with individuals and groups who share a similar vision (e.g., community town hall meetings).
- For policymakers: Critically examine how neoliberal cost-benefit logic shapes immigration and replaces the “excessive demand” provision with disability-inclusive

criteria consistent with Canada’s obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Following these guidelines, policymakers need to ensure that the human rights of migrants with disabilities during their application for permanent residency are protected.

Ultimately, advancing justice for disabled migrants requires reconsidering immigration not simply as an administrative process but as a site where disability justice, migrant justice, and social work values converge. The abovementioned strategies illustrate how social workers and researchers can engage with anti-oppression on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, and continue to develop creative, collaborative strategies that resist neoliberal ableism and foreground the lived experiences of disabled migrants in immigration policy. Future research and practice are needed to examine and elaborate on these recommended strategies. Particularly, social workers and researchers need to continually reflect on how research and practice can facilitate the implementation of anti-oppressive practice within a neoliberal agenda.

Conclusion

The systemic barriers faced by disabled migrants in applying for permanent residency in Canada are not only administrative hurdles but manifestations of neoliberal ableism and nation-state power. These obstacles constitute an urgent social justice issue that requires collective attention and sustained action. Due to their precarious status as temporary residents and the pervasive assumption that they are less “worthy” of inclusion (El-Lahib,

2016; McDonald, 2011), disabled migrants' concerns are often overlooked or silenced. This paper has traced how neoliberal logics, the bordering practices of the Canadian nation-state, and entrenched ableism intersect to exclude disabled migrants from permanent residency pathways. By situating this exclusion within broader structural and historical contexts, we highlight the need for responses that move beyond individualized service models toward systemic transformation.

Social workers, working at micro, mezzo, and macro levels, have the responsibility and opportunity to resist these exclusions, yet this also requires reflexivity. As a profession often aligned with the state, social work must recognize its own complicity in sustaining exclusionary systems. Advancing justice for migrants with disabilities, therefore, means working in partnership with disability-led movements, amplifying the voices of disabled migrants themselves, and challenging the neoliberal cost-benefit logics that continue to shape Canadian immigration policy.

The struggle for inclusion in immigration is inseparable from broader struggles for disability justice. Lessons from this analysis may also inform work with other marginalized populations facing systemic exclusion, further advancing equity within Canadian society. Ultimately, creating just immigration pathways demands a fundamental shift, one that values disabled lives not for their perceived economic utility, but for their inherent worth, dignity, and contributions to collective social life.

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