

Bullying, harassment and discrimination of Disabled people in the workplace

A TUC report – June 2025



The TUC

The TUC exists to make the working world a better place for everyone. We bring together more than 5.2 million working people who make up our 48 affiliate unions. We believe all workers deserve respect, and the opportunity to make the most of their talents.

We have a long and proud history of promoting equality for all our members. We strive to end all forms of discrimination, bigotry and stereotyping. We oppose any violence or intimidation, bullying or disrespect, towards any group that faces discrimination, and from whatever quarter. The TUC's commitment to equality is written into our constitution and into that of our member unions.

Social model of disability

The TUC has adopted the social model of disability. The social model of disability focuses on the ways in which society is organised, and the social and institutional barriers which restrict disabled people's opportunities. The social model sees the person first and argues that the barriers they face, in combination with their impairments, are what disables them. Barriers can make it impossible or very difficult to access jobs, buildings or services, but the biggest barrier of all is the problem of people's attitude towards disability. Removing the barriers is the best way to include millions of disabled people in our society.

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Executive Summary

Disabled workers face persistent and widespread barriers in the workplace, despite longstanding legal protections. Our research findings consistently highlight the systemic nature of discrimination, inaccessibility, and inequality that disabled people encounter throughout their working lives.

This report finds that workplace cultures present major barriers. Nearly half (49 per cent) of disabled workers reported bullying or harassment in the past year, while almost four in ten (39 per cent) said they had been subjected to disability-related mistreatment in their working lives. Common experiences included intrusive questioning, offensive jokes or “banter,” exclusion from activities, and in some cases, verbal abuse or physical threats.

The impact of these behaviours was severe. Among disabled workers who had experienced bullying or harassment related to disability in the past five years, 42 per cent reported a negative impact on their mental health, 38 per cent experienced a decline in their workplace confidence, and 31 per cent said their work performance was affected. These findings underscore the urgent need for improvement to ensure all disabled workers feel safe, respected, and supported at work.

Yet, for many, fear remains a major obstacle to telling their employer about their health condition. One in five disabled workers had not told their employer of their health condition, impairment or disability. The reasons were clear: 34 per cent of those who hadn't told their employer about their disability feared being viewed as unable to do their job, 26 per cent were concerned about job security, and 25 per cent expected unfair treatment. Around a quarter (24 per cent) did not see any point in telling their employer as they didn't think they would receive any support. One-fifth had never been asked about their disability status (20 per cent) and around the same proportion didn't know how to start the conversation (19 per cent).

Around a quarter (27 per cent) of those who haven't told their employer haven't done so as they don't feel it's any of their employer's business.

This culture of silence is particularly pronounced among disabled workers on non-permanent contracts and those receiving less than statutory sick pay, with 27 per cent and 31 per cent respectively choosing not to tell their employer they were disabled.

When disabled workers experience bullying, discrimination or harassment related to disability, less than half (42 per cent) report it to their employer. Disabled workers who do report incidents are unlikely to have their complaint taken seriously or for it to be handled fairly. Fewer than one in four disabled workers who reported the most recent incident of bullying or harassment related to disability said that their complaints were handled fairly (24 per cent) or appropriately investigated (23 per cent). Almost a quarter (23 per cent) said their complaint was ignored entirely, while 16 per cent felt they were not believed. These failings contribute to a workplace environment where many feel unsafe reporting misconduct and, in some cases, are left with no choice but to leave their job.

Support from trade unions plays a vital role in enabling disabled workers to navigate these challenges. While 39 per cent of respondents who have experienced bullying, discrimination or harassment related to disability in the past five years were current trade union members, only a quarter of those had sought support from their union.

Among all Disabled workers who are members of a trade union, a third (32 per cent) report that their union has supported them as a disabled person. Support included representation in discussions with employers, guidance on workplace rights, and help in securing reasonable adjustments or disability leave. Trade unions also played an important role in advocating for systemic change, connecting members to peer support networks and pushing for inclusive policies.

In order to encourage more open dialogue between disabled workers and their employers, the government must adopt the social model of disability, embedding it within law by making the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) enforceable in domestic legislation. This shift would reframe the narratives on and around disability and drive inclusive policies that recognise and remove structural barriers.

Transparency and accountability are essential in driving progress. Yet, the lack of consistent data collection on disabled workers' outcomes hinders meaningful change. The government must introduce mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting for all employers with over 50 staff. They should also work with recognised trade unions to develop targeted action plans detailing how they will close identified gaps. These plans must also address intersectional inequalities, including specific strategies for improving outcomes for disabled women and disabled black workers. Importantly, employers must ensure disabled workers feel confident in participating in equality monitoring by building trust and transparency in how data is collected and used.

Overall, these findings paint a sobering picture of exclusion and inequality, but they also point the way forward. Action is urgently needed to ensure the workplace is a safe, equitable, and accessible space for all. Clear notification on adjustment requests, accurate recording of disability-related leave, mandatory transparency through disability employment and pay gap reporting, and legally enforceable commitments to the social model of disability will be critical steps. Only then can we dismantle the barriers that continue to hold back disabled workers and build a future rooted in fairness, dignity, and inclusion.

Recommendations

Government

The Government should:

Third party harassment: Ensure measures in the employment rights bill to strengthen legislation to tackle third-party harassment are delivered in full. Employers currently have a duty of care for all workers; however, in relation to third party harassment it is not always clear to employers or workers what this means and what proactive measures need to be put in place to ensure workers are protected. The government must reintroduce section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 which places a duty on employers to protect workers from third-party harassment. Government should also extend the Worker Protection Act to include prevention of harassment by third parties. This would ensure clear and comprehensive legal protection on the grounds of harassment and sexual harassment.

The social model of disability: The government should adopt the social model of disability. One way of bringing the social model of disability into the heart of UK law would be to make the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons (UNCRPD) enforceable within UK law.

Fully incorporating the Convention would bring the added benefit of addressing one of the outstanding recommendations the UNCRPD to the UK on how to improve and make further progress against the Convention's aims.

The [Convention's purpose](#) is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all disabled people, and to promote respect for disabled people's inherent dignity.¹

Reinstate employment tribunals' power to make wider recommendations: The Equality Act 2010 gave employment tribunals the power to make wider recommendations for the benefit of the wider workforce, not just the individual claimant, in relation to discrimination claims. This power was removed by the Deregulation Act 2015. In workplaces where a culture of bullying, harassment and discrimination has been allowed to flourish or where there are systemic failures of the organisation to respond adequately to complaints of harassment, the power to make wider recommendations would be of great benefit.

Work with unions: on a strategy to make sure workplaces are safe for all Disabled Workers.

Support disabled people into work: Act to ensure that those disabled workers who are able to work, and want to work, have the support they need to enter and stay in work.

¹ <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>

Where employers have not put in place the reasonable adjustments disabled workers need to do their job, the disabled worker should not face a detriment linked to benefits or their removal/reduction.

Disability Leave: The government should require employers record impairment related sick leave taken by disabled workers separately from other sick leave. This would recognise that some disabled people may have different and higher forms of disability linked absence and stop disabled workers from being pulled into automated HR processes by triggering an employer's sick leave policy.

Disability employment and pay gap reporting and action plans: In order to promote transparency and ensure workforce monitoring is used consistently across employers the government must introduce mandatory disability employment and pay gap reporting, for all employers with over 50 staff.

The legislation must be accompanied by a duty on employers to produce targeted action plans in consultation with recognised trade unions identifying the steps they will take to address any gaps identified, including ensuring disabled workers feel confident in completing workplace equality monitoring.

The action plans employers produce must also identify and address intersectional issues for example how they intend to identify and address gaps for disabled women. These action plans must be produced in consultation with recognised trade unions.

Access To Work: Remove the support cap and ensure application and renewal processes are efficient, personalised, and flexible. Entitled disabled jobseekers should get 'in principle' indicative awards. Access to Work should be reformed to provide quick and efficient access to the service with reduced waiting times.

Right to disconnect: Introducing a statutory right for employees and workers to disconnect from their work so as to create "communication free" time in their lives.

Regulatory Bodies

Strengthen the role of regulatory bodies. Given the worryingly high levels of workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination the research found, there is a clear need for greater activity, including enforcement activity, by regulatory bodies such as the EHRC which has responsibility for equality legislation, and the HSE, which has responsibility to ensure the risks of encountering harassment and violence at work are assessed and prevented or controlled. These bodies should be given, and maintain, the political independence needed to perform their functions. The government should work with them to coordinate an appropriate response to the findings of this research and are provided with the necessary resources to do this.

Additional funding for the EHRC: The government should ensure the EHRC has sufficient funding to discharge their legal duties and take first instance cases (at the Employment Tribunal where proceedings are begun or first heard) on failure of employers to put in place reasonable adjustments.

Guidance for employers on the use of positive action: the EHRC should work with employers to develop practical guidance to increase their understanding and confidence in using the positive action provisions permitted in the Equality Act 2010 to address the under-representation of disabled people.

Employers

Employers should:

Review existing policies: Employers should work with trade unions to review their workplace policies, in light of this report and through a Social Model of Disability lens to ensure that they appropriately address disabled workers' issues.

Make all workplace policies inclusive: Ensure all their policies, including those on harassment and sexual harassment, are inclusive of Disabled Workers, using appropriate language, examples and case studies. Policies should be negotiated with unions. All staff should receive training on these policies, including new staff in their induction and line managers, so that the whole workforce understands the policy and their role in ensuring the workplace is free from harassment and victimisation.

Adopt a zero-tolerance approach: Employers should take a zero-tolerance approach to all forms of discrimination and harassment (and sexual harassment). This should include workplace policies and training, including what bystanders should do to challenge harassment. Where such incidents do occur, there should be clear disciplinary procedures in place for the perpetrator and support for the victim.

Translate workplace policies into an inclusive culture: Take action to make sure that appropriate workplace policies translate into an inclusive culture. Provide training and information about Disabled Workers issues. Ensure that staff and managers can identify ableism when it occurs, see any issues through a social model of disability lens, and work with unions to design safe reporting systems.

Clear culture of inclusivity from the top: Make sure that senior staff are equipped to set a clear culture of inclusivity from the top, and quickly and effectively stamp out bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Review recruitment processes and data: Employers should analyse trends and introduce steps to support Disabled staff to thrive, such as training for hiring managers, and providing information to candidates about the employer's commitment to inclusion, as well monitoring internal data on who accesses training and promotion opportunities.

Training: HR and all levels of management should receive training on sexual harassment, what constitutes sexual harassment, stalking and online harassment, relevant law and workplace policies, and how to respond to complaints of sexual harassment. In some workplaces, training for all staff may be appropriate.

Introduce disability pay gap reporting: Employers should not wait for the government to bring in mandatory disability pay gap reporting and should take immediate steps to identify and address any gaps they have.

The social model of disability: Employers should adopt the social model of disability which focuses on the ways in which society is organised, and the social and institutional barriers which restrict disabled people's opportunities. The social model sees the person first and argues that the barriers they face, in combination with their impairments, are what disables them. Barriers can make it impossible or very difficult to access jobs, buildings or services, but the biggest barrier of all is the problem of people's attitude towards disability. Removing the barriers is the best way to include millions of disabled people in our society.

Trade Unions

Trade Unions should:

Review guidance and training: Unions should review their guidance and training for reps on how to support members who have been harassed or bullied to ensure they are inclusive.

Review employer policies on bullying, harassment and discrimination: Unions should work with employers to review their policies on bullying, harassment and discrimination, to ensure they are inclusive by using appropriate language, examples and case studies throughout.

Negotiate robust workplace policies: Any policy that aims to tackle harassment, abuse or violence should clearly define the behaviours and recognise the employer's duty to prevent and/or deal with any harassment from third-parties. Unions may want to collect anonymised information about members' experiences of third-party harassment, abuse or violence to help strengthen negotiations with an employer.

Workplace campaigns: Run workplace campaigns and organising. Trade unions should publicise the support they can offer in all cases of harassment, abuse and violence and proactively target recruitment and organising activities at Disabled workers. Unions should proactively organise Disabled representatives and provide opportunities for leadership development.

Consult with Disabled members regularly to identify gaps in policy and practice: Particularly around issues such as bullying, harassment and discrimination, recruitment, and access to facilities.

Work with employers to review policies: Work with employers to review reasonable adjustments policies and practices in light of this report through a Social Model of Disability Len. They should negotiate for increased access to reasonable adjustments including those that grant flexible working including hybrid and home working and for the implementation of a reasonable adjustment's passport like the [TUC's Reasonable Adjustments Disability Passport](#). Trade unions are best placed to ensure the needs of employers and preferences of staff are reconciled through constructive dialogue and negotiation.

Current legal provisions

The definition of disability in equality law

Disabled people are protected by the Equality Act 2010 from discrimination in employment and a range of other areas including education, provision of services and transport.

The Equality Act defines disability as a “physical or mental impairment...[that] has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

Government guidance makes clear that 'substantial' means more than minor or trivial and 'long-term' means 12 months or more. The guidance also highlights the importance of considering the cumulative impact of multiple impairments that a person might have and states that even if individual impairments might not have a substantial impact if considered in isolation “account should be taken of whether the impairments together have a substantial effect overall on the person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”.

The Equality Act 2010 is clear; a worker must not be discriminated against because they are disabled.

Discrimination in the workplace, for being disabled, is when a worker is treated differently because of their disability, impairment, or long-term health condition. The treatment could be a one-off action or as a result of a rule or policy based on disability status and it doesn’t have to be intentional to be unlawful.

The Equality Act 2010 defines harassment as unwanted conduct, because of a protected characteristic, that violates someone’s dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. It can never be justified.

While there is no one specific law that outlaws workplace bullying, that does not mean that employers do not have a legal duty to prevent it. All employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. That includes protection from bullying and harassment at work. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations also require employers to assess the nature and the scale of workplace risks to health and safety, ensure there are proper control measures in place, and take action to remove or avoid these risks wherever possible as far as is reasonably practical.

The Health and Safety Executive also states that “there should be systems in place to deal with interpersonal conflicts such as bullying and harassment”.

The Employment Rights Act 1996 allows employees who have been in their job for more than two years to claim constructive unfair dismissal if they are forced to leave their job because of severe bullying that their employer did nothing about it.

If someone has been unfairly dismissed because of 'protected characteristic' like disability status, this could be discrimination. They could make a claim to an employment tribunal for both discrimination and unfair dismissal.

For the discrimination claim, they do not need to have worked for their employer for 2 years.

Resigning is a big step to take. A constructive dismissal claim can be difficult to win at an employment tribunal. An employee should talk to their trade union before taking such a significant step.

Examples of bullying, harassment and discrimination of disabled workers

As set out above the law protects disabled workers from bullying, harassment and discrimination. Some examples that would constitute either bullying, harassment (or both) or discrimination of and disabled worker include:

- spoken or written abuse
- offensive emails
- tweets or comments on websites and social media
- physical gestures
- 'banter' that is offensive to the disabled worker
- ignoring or excluding disabled workers
- offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting
- an abuse or misuse of power that undermines, humiliates, or causes physical or emotional harm to disabled workers
- Regularly and deliberately ignoring or excluding individuals from discussions or activities

Where does bullying, harassment and discrimination occur

Workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination can take place in a range of different locations. For example, in the office or online while working remotely, a client or patient's home, on a work trip, a team away-day or at a work social event such as a Christmas party. Social media and emails are increasingly involved in workplace bullying, harassment and discrimination.

As well as taking different forms and occurring in diverse settings, bullying, harassment and discrimination at work may be perpetrated by people in a range of roles, including managers, potential employers, colleagues, clients, patients, or customers. For example,

a care worker might be harassed by a client when on a home visit or a prospective employer might say something demeaning about disabled people in front of a disabled actor at a casting session. Harassment perpetrated by a client, contractor or customer is referred to as third-party harassment.

What do we know about bullying, harassment and discrimination of Disabled workers

Over the years the TUC, and other organisations, have looked at and conducted polling, surveys and other forms of research on bullying, harassment and discrimination of disabled workers.

This report does not focus on sexual harassment of disabled people at work. However, sexual harassment of disabled women workers is an important consideration for policy makers, campaigners and employers to prioritise. Research on this can be found in the TUC's 2021 report, 'Sexual harassment of disabled women in the workplace.'²

Social model of disability

The social model of disability focuses on the ways in which society is organised, and the social and institutional barriers which restrict disabled people's opportunities. The social model sees the person first and argues that the barriers they face, in combination with their impairments, are what disables them. Barriers can make it impossible or very difficult to access jobs, buildings or services, but the biggest barrier of all is the problem of people's attitude towards disability. Removing the barriers is the best way to include millions of disabled people in our society.

² <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/sexual-harassment-disabled-women-workplace>

Introduction

The TUC has long standing concerns about the treatment of disabled workers within the workplace. Disabled workers tell us that poor treatment in the workplace can lead to sickness absence, poor progression opportunities and withdrawal from the labour market if not addressed. It is an issue frequently highlighted at the TUC Disabled Workers Conference and by the Disabled Workers Committee who have reiterated that bullying, harassment and discrimination is an ongoing issue for disabled workers.

This issue was further highlighted in the [TUC's 2024 Equality Audit](#)⁴ which found that the most common equality/inequality area faced by workplace reps in the more recent period was issues related to disability, with 56 per cent of them citing this. This is despite the fact that all employers have a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to prevent harassment.

The TUC undertook this research to further understand disabled workers' experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination at work, its impact and to consider how best to negate it. As part of this research we also looked at disabled workers experiences around reasonable adjustments – you can find the full report [HERE](#)³.

³ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/disabled-workers-access-reasonable-adjustment>

Findings

The biggest issues facing disabled workers

We asked disabled workers what were the biggest issues they faced.

Over a third (34 per cent) of respondents said the biggest issue was not getting the reasonable adjustments they needed. Over a third (34 per cent) said disability related leave being counted as sick leave.⁵ These issues are examined in our report, [‘Disabled workers’ access to reasonable adjustment -A TUC Report – April 2025.](#)⁴

Just under three in ten (28 per cent) said bullying, discrimination and harassment in the workplace.

The disabled workers who responded also highlighted the lack of inclusive policies as a key issue (25 per cent) and being paid less than people who are not disabled (12 per cent).

Comfort levels talking about health, disability, impairment, or long-term health condition

We asked disabled workers who responded to our survey how comfortable or uncomfortable they felt talking about their health, including disability, impairment, or long-term health condition if applicable, to their manager or supervisor and their colleagues.

Our analysis found that over a third (34 per cent) of disabled workers polled were uncomfortable talking about their health, including disability, impairment, or long-term health condition with their manager or supervisor while just under three in 10 (29 per cent) were uncomfortable talking about these topics with their colleagues.

Our analysis suggests that disabled workers who have higher comfort levels about discussing their disability, impairment or long-term health condition with their employer, have more accepting workplaces, whereas disabled workers with lower comfort levels suggest the opposite.

Telling employers about disability, health condition or impairment

We asked disabled workers who responded to our survey if they had told their employer they were disabled or had a health condition or impairment.

One in five (20 per cent) said they had not told them. This is not surprising considering our finding that a third of disabled workers are uncomfortable discussing their health, including disability, impairment, or long-term health condition with their manager.

⁴ [‘Disabled workers’ access to reasonable adjustment | TUC](#)

Being able to discuss your disability with your manager and telling your employer is the first step needed in ensuring a disabled worker can access any reasonable adjustments they require to remove barriers from the workplace and ensure they are able to do their jobs.

There was a strong consistency across all groups of workers with around one in five not telling their employer about their disability. However, there were two groups who were far less like to do so. They were:

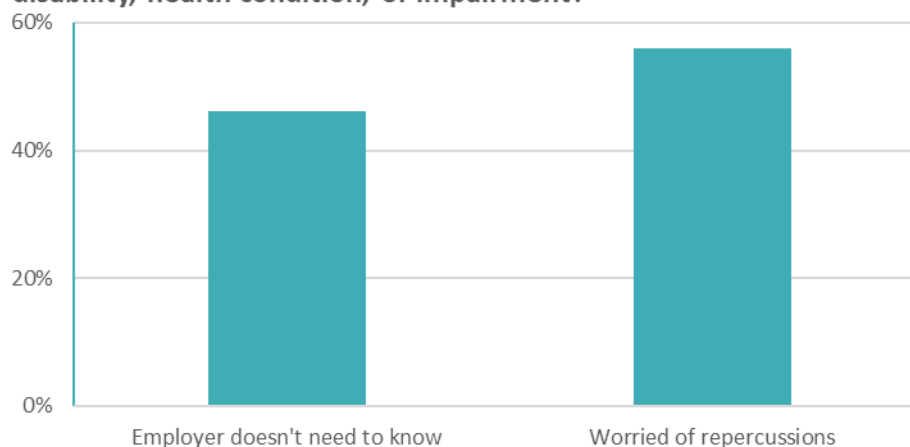
- Workers on a non-permanent contract – 27 per cent
- Workers who received less than statutory sick pay – 31 per cent

Why disabled workers did not tell their employer about their disability, health condition or impairment

We asked the disabled workers who said they had not told their employer about their disability, health condition or impairment why they had not, to understand what barriers were stopping them from doing so.

Over half (56 per cent) of those who haven't told their employer did not tell their employer because they were worried about the repercussions of doing so. Just over a third (34 per cent) encountered issues bringing it up to their employer.

Why have you not told your employer about your disability, health condition, or impairment?



Source: Opinion polling sourced by the TUC

Repercussions

We asked about the specific repercussions that disabled workers were worried about. Over a third (34 per cent) of respondents who hadn't told their employer about their disability told us they were worried their employer would think they could not do their job, over a quarter (26 per cent) said they were worried they might lose their job, a quarter (25 per cent) said they were worried they would be treated unfairly and three in 20 (15 per cent) said they were worried their employer might tell their colleagues.

Issues bring up their disability

Just under a quarter of respondents (24 per cent) said they did not think they would be supported if they told their employer about their disability so there was no point, one in five (20 per cent) said they had never been asked if they had a disability, health condition or impairment and just under one in five (19 per cent) said they did not know how to start the conversation.

	Percentage of respondents
I'm worried they will think I cannot do my job	34%
It's none of my employer's business	27%
I'm worried I might lose my job	26%
It doesn't affect how well I do my job, so my employer doesn't need to know	26%
I'm worried they will treat me unfairly	25%
I do not think they will support me so there is no point	24%
I've never been asked if I have a disability, health condition, or impairment	20%
I didn't know how to start the conversation	19%
I'm worried my employer might tell my colleagues	15%
Other (please specify)	3%
Not applicable - There's no reason in particular	7%
Don't know	0%
Prefer not to say	0%

Experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination Generally

The findings from the survey indicate that experiences of bullying and harassment in work-related contexts remain a significant issue, particularly for disabled workers.

Our research found that nearly half (49 per cent) reported experiencing some form of bullying or harassment over the past 12 months highlighting the broad scope and pervasive nature of such behaviours.

The most reported experience was people making respondents feel uncomfortable in their working environment, affecting almost one in four respondents (24 per cent). This was followed by offensive jokes or banter (13 per cent), and verbal abuse, including name-calling (12 per cent).

Other prominent issues included deliberate exclusion from work-related activities, affecting one in 10 (11 per cent), and offensive or intrusive questioning about personal characteristics, impacting one in 10 (10 per cent) respondents.

Notably, almost one in 10 (9 per cent) reported experiencing discriminatory or prejudicial remarks, and 7 per cent encountered physical violence, threats, or intimidation. A smaller but still concerning proportion one in 20 (5 per cent) reported exposure to offensive literature, music, or images. One in 10 (10 per cent) indicated they had faced other forms of bullying or harassment not captured by the categories listed.

This underscores the urgency of addressing workplace culture, regardless of where or when these interactions occur.

These results reveal a workplace climate where disabled workers continue to face inappropriate, harmful, or hostile behaviours and emphasize the need for stronger preventative measures, more effective support systems, and a cultural shift toward respect and accountability in all professional interactions, ensuring disabled workers feel safe and valued.

Experiences of bullying, harassment, and discrimination linked to disability

The findings of this survey reveal the widespread and persistent nature of bullying, harassment, and discrimination experienced by disabled workers on the basis of their disability, impairment or health condition. Nearly four in ten (39 per cent) reported having been subjected to some form of mistreatment related to their disability, impairment, or long-term health condition during the course of their working lives. These experiences were not confined to formal workplace settings or working hours and were perpetrated by a range of individuals, including colleagues, clients, customers, patients, and members of the public encountered through work.

The most commonly reported experience, cited by 15 per cent of respondents, was being subjected to intrusive or offensive questioning about their disability that made them feel offended or humiliated. Similarly, 14 per cent reported that they had been made to feel uncomfortable at work due to stereotypes or assumptions about their disability, while the same proportion (14 per cent) had experienced offensive jokes or "banter" about disabled people—an experience that contributes to a hostile and exclusionary work environment.

Bullying emerged as a significant concern, with 12 per cent of respondents indicating that they had experienced bullying due to their disability. 10 per cent had witnessed verbal or physical abuse related to disability.

These findings suggest a broader culture in which ableism is tolerated or ignored.

Nine percent of respondents reported being deliberately left out of work-related meetings, conversations, or social events because of their disability, while a similar proportion (9 per cent) had heard ableist remarks made in their presence. Notably, 8 per cent had experienced direct verbal abuse, and 7 per cent had been the target of ableist remarks. Although less frequent, the most severe forms of abuse were still present: 4 per cent had faced physical violence, threats, or intimidation, and 4 per cent

reported the distribution of offensive literature, music, or images about disabled people.

Taken together, the data points to a deeply embedded pattern of ableist behaviour in and around the workplace. It underscores the need for urgent structural change to ensure that all workers—regardless of disability status—can work in environments free from prejudice, exclusion, and harm. The findings highlight not only the frequency of individual incidents but also the broader cultural and systemic issues that enable such behaviours to persist unchecked.

Impact of bullying and harassment on disabled workers

Nearly all Disabled Workers who had experienced bullying or harassment related to disability in the past 5 years (97 per cent) reported experiencing at least one negative impact as a result.

The most commonly cited consequence was a negative impact on mental health, with 42 per cent stating it made them feel more stressed, anxious, or depressed. A significant proportion also reported a decline in workplace confidence (38 per cent) and feelings of embarrassment (36 per cent). Additionally, 31 per cent indicated that their performance at work was negatively affected.

Beyond emotional and professional impacts, the experience also led to more structural disruptions in the workplace. Over a quarter of respondents said it made them want to leave their job but were unable to due to financial or other constraints (28 per cent), and an equal proportion (28 per cent) avoided certain work situations—such as meetings, courses, or particular shifts—to avoid the perpetrator. One in five had to take time off work (20 per cent) or reported a negative impact on their physical health (20 per cent).

For some, the effects were more severe: 16 per cent left their job or employer altogether, and 9 per cent changed their role within the organisation as a result of the experience.

These findings underline the substantial and multifaceted harm caused by disability-related bullying and harassment in the workplace, with consequences that extend across emotional wellbeing, job retention, and professional progression for disabled workers.

Responses to disability-related bullying and harassment

When asked what actions they took in response to their most recent experience of bullying or harassment related to disability, disabled workers reported a range of formal and informal responses.

The most common course of action was to speak to someone in their personal network: 39 per cent said they told a member of their family, partner, or friends. Nearly a third (29 per cent) spoke to a work colleague, and 28 per cent reported the incident to their

employer. Overall, 42 per cent took some form of action that involved reporting the incident to their employer.

Fewer respondents sought support from formal workplace or external channels. Fifteen percent sought help from a trade union, 13 per cent took out a formal grievance, and 10 per cent sought legal advice. A smaller proportion turned to community organisations (9 per cent) or initiated an employment tribunal case (8 per cent).

Notably, 15 per cent of respondents said they did nothing in response to the incident, and the majority of respondents (58 per cent) did not report the incident to an employer, indicating barriers to seeking support or a lack of confidence in the system.

These findings suggest that while many disabled workers take steps to report or discuss their experiences, formal action through employers or legal channels is less common, potentially reflecting concerns about retaliation, lack of trust in the process, or insufficient support mechanisms.

Employer response to reports of disability-related bullying or harassment

Among disabled workers who reported bullying or harassment related to disability to their employer, experiences of how the complaint was handled were mixed, with fewer than half describing an appropriate investigative response.

Fewer than one in four said their complaint or grievance was taken seriously (24 per cent), dealt with fairly (24 per cent), or informally investigated (23 per cent). Just over one-quarter (27 per cent) felt their complaint was dealt with promptly, while 26 per cent said it was formally investigated.

A significant minority reported a lack of action or credibility given to their report: nearly a quarter (23 per cent) said their complaint was ignored, and 16 per cent felt it was not believed. Combined, a third (34 per cent) felt their complaint was either ignored or dismissed.

These findings highlight the need for stronger and more consistent employer responses to complaints of disability-related bullying or harassment, particularly around credibility, fairness, and timely investigation.

Experiences of Disabled People in the Workplace

When asked about their workplace experiences, many disabled workers reported persistent challenges that reflect wider issues of exclusion and inequality. Half (49 per cent) said they do not have disabled role models in management they can look up to, highlighting a significant lack of representation in leadership and decision-making roles.

Experiences of risk and exclusion were also common. Almost a third (29 per cent) reported feeling more at risk of bullying or harassment at work because of their disability, impairment, or long-term health condition. Similarly, 28 per cent said they

would not feel confident reporting such incidents to their employer, potentially pointing to concerns around trust, safety, or the adequacy of workplace procedures.

Barriers to career progression also remain a concern. Nearly one-third (31 per cent) said they had experienced obstacles to getting jobs or promotions due to their disability. Additionally, 19 per cent said that the culture in their workplace was not inclusive of them as a disabled person, underscoring the need for more systemic change.

These findings suggest that some disabled employees face an environment where they do not feel represented, included, or safe. This could have potential long-term impacts on career development, wellbeing, and retention.

Trade Union Support

To understand how being a trade union member impacted on disabled members experiences we asked about trade union membership. Just over a quarter (28 per cent) of respondents were current members of a trade union.

We asked current disabled trade union members how their experiences had been as a member. Around a third (32 per cent) told us their union had supported them as a disabled person. Just under one in ten (9 per cent) said their union was not supportive of them as a disabled person.

Over a third (35 per cent) of current disabled trade union members said they had not sought support from their union, 17 per cent said their union was neither supportive nor unsupportive, 6 per cent were not sure and 1 per cent preferred not to say.

To understand what kind of support disabled trade union members were getting from their union we asked current members how their union was supporting them.

	Percentage of respondents
Represented me in discussions with my employer	20%
Shared resources about my rights at work	20%
Provided advice or guidance on disability-related workplace issues	18%
Helped me with a request for reasonable adjustments	17%
Advocated for policies benefiting disabled workers more broadly	13%
Helped me secure disability leave with my employer	11%
Connected me with other disabled members or support networks	10%
Other (please specify)	1%
None of the above	33%
Not sure	5%
Prefer not to say	0%

One in five (20 per cent) had their union represent them in discussions with their employer, one in five (20 per cent) said their union shared resources about their rights at work and 18 per cent had been provided with advice or guidance on disability-related workplace issues.

17 per cent of disabled trade union members reported receiving support with a request for reasonable adjustments and just over one in ten (11 per cent) said their union had secured disability leave with their employer.

Members had also recognised their union had advocated for policies benefiting disabled workers more broadly (13 per cent) and connected them with other disabled members or support networks (10 per cent).

Conclusion

This report reveals the widespread and damaging nature of bullying, harassment, and discrimination faced by disabled workers in the UK. Nearly half have experienced mistreatment in the past year, ranging from exclusion and offensive "banter" to verbal abuse and physical intimidation. These incidents are often not formally addressed by employers, even when they are reported, and the emotional and professional toll is clear: impacting workers' mental health, confidence, and job security.

Formal reporting channels are often distrusted or ineffective, with many complaints ignored or poorly handled by employers. A lack of visible disabled role models and inclusive cultures further contributes to feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

Some disabled workers feel unable to tell their employers about their disability, fearing retaliation or being perceived as less capable.

The findings point to the need for systemic change.

Workplaces must move beyond performative inclusion and take concrete steps to dismantle ableist cultures, ensure robust reporting systems, and provide meaningful support. Trade unions also have a critical role to play in defending disabled workers' rights and pushing for lasting reform. Without bold action, too many disabled workers will continue to face bullying, harassment and discrimination in silence.

Methodology

In order to better understand disabled workers' experiences of bullying, harassment and discrimination at work, the TUC commissioned in-depth research. Between 22 January 2025 and 4 February 2025, we surveyed 1,000 adult disabled workers in Great Britain.

To take part in the survey a respondent had to confirm they had a health problem, illness or disability that reduce their ability to carry out day-to-day activities in any way. This ensured respondents would be counted as disabled within the Equality Act 2010.

Throughout this report we will indicate where the number of respondents within a subgroup is around the minimum number for analyses to be statistically reliable. Any subsample will be subject to a greater margin of error than the sample as a whole.

Due to low sample sizes, we have not been able to analyse the experiences of disabled, LGBT+ or disabled Black workers.⁵

⁵ Carried out by Opinium Research a member of the British Polling Council.