



Invisible and unheard: epistemic injustice at the intersection of migration and disability

Chianu Dibia & Chioma Dibia

To cite this article: Chianu Dibia & Chioma Dibia (19 Feb 2026): Invisible and unheard: epistemic injustice at the intersection of migration and disability, *Disability & Society*, DOI: [10.1080/09687599.2026.2629891](https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2629891)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2629891>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 Feb 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 123



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Invisible and unheard: epistemic injustice at the intersection of migration and disability

Chianu Dibia^a  and Chioma Dibia^b

^aSouthampton Business School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; ^bEdinburgh Law School, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

Migrants with disabilities have been described as the ‘hidden population’, as a lack of official and accurate data renders them largely invisible. In this essay, we suggest that beyond the problem of invisibility, they also experience a lack of voice by which we mean that their experiences are often dismissed or ascribed less credibility. We frame the problem in terms of epistemic injustice and consider how factors such as the experience of interpersonal discrimination and barriers to accessing healthcare contribute to and exacerbate these injustices. We further suggest that the experience of such injustices by migrants with disabilities will be particularly heightened in these times of increasing hostilities against migrants, especially in the Global North. Hence, the considerations presented in this essay are timely and targeted at inspiring creative solutions to address this burgeoning problem.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 August 2025
Accepted 15 January 2026

KEYWORDS

Epistemic injustice;
disability; migration;
intersectionality

In the current global climate, migration attracts significant attention, particularly in news coverage and in the streets of major cities in many Western countries. In the UK, this is visible in street protests – often termed ‘anti-migrant protests’ – which are sometimes met by organised counter-protests (Yhnell and De La Mare 2025). The UK Government has also recently announced proposed changes to the migration model which have been described as ‘the toughest in Europe’ and would potentially see ‘illegal migrants and arrivals reliant on benefits...waiting between 20 and 30 years to settle...’ (GOV.UK 2025). Across the Atlantic, a similarly adverse climate is evident in reports of migrants being detained in the US. A striking example, which is reflective of some of the issues which we consider in this paper, is the case of Rodney Taylor who was reportedly detained in an immigration facility for three months, despite having a pending residence application (Pratt 2025). While Rodney was vulnerable by virtue of his status as a migrant,

CONTACT Chianu Dibia  c.h.dibia@soton.ac.uk

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

this vulnerability was exacerbated by his positionality as a person with disability. Rodney, whose legs had been amputated in childhood, needed new prosthetic legs while in detention. However, his request for medical leave was denied and he was provided with ill-fitting shoes which, according to Rodney, 'felt like walking on concrete on my knees'. As Rodney put it, 'They think, 'Everybody is getting deported soon...and fixing your issue is not our concern – getting you outta here is our concern. Why spend all this extra money?' (Pratt 2025)

While cases such as Rodney's points to the particular vulnerability of migrants with disabilities, their experiences have not typically been centred in intersectional analyses because issues relating to disability and migration are often relegated to the margins of such discourse (Burns 2019). In what Watermeyer and Swartz (2023) describe as the 'problem of lazy intersectionality', they highlight a perceived tendency to exclude disability in intersectional analysis. Ned et al. (2025), however, argue that disability is not absent from intersectional scholarship, but that such work has simply failed to penetrate mainstream disability studies. Migrant status, by contrast, has seldom been analysed as an axis of exclusion in its own right, as it is often subsumed under the category of race. While there is substantial overlap between both categories, given the high proportion of non-White migrants in Western societies (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024), migrants face distinctive disadvantages that racially minoritised non-migrants may not experience. Following Burns (2019), we consider a 'migrant' to be any person who has moved across an international border or within a state away from their habitual residence, regardless of legal status or migration motive. Their experiences are varied and unique, deserving specific consideration outwith the category of race. This is especially crucial for migrants with disabilities, who are rendered largely invisible by the lack of official and accurate data (Amas and Lagnado 2010). However, beyond invisibility, this paper suggests that migrants with disabilities also suffer from a lack of voice: they are not only rarely seen but are also scarcely heard.

Our central claim is that migrants with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to epistemic injustice, as their experiences are especially susceptible to dismissal due to prejudice and gaps in shared understanding. Drawing on previous research which highlight the diminished credibility ascribed to testimonies by migrants with disabilities, this essay frames the problem in terms of epistemic injustice. Using Fricker's categorisation, it analyses how testimonial and hermeneutical injustices manifest for migrants with disabilities, including in interpersonal encounters and in structural and cultural barriers to healthcare. By highlighting these nuanced forms of injustice, this essay aims to deepen the understanding of specific vulnerabilities that arise at the intersection of disability and migration. While some authors have already engaged with this intersection (El-Lahib 2016; Hultman et al. 2025; Scheer

et al. 2025), only Hultman et al. (2025) explicitly link the experiences of migrants with disabilities to testimonial injustice. This essay therefore seeks to extend the existing literature and to draw attention to this often-neglected problem, especially in these times of rising hostility towards migrants in many Western societies (Hultman et al. 2025; Berghe and Wilkinson 2026).

What is epistemic injustice?

Although the term ‘epistemic injustice’ is attributed to Miranda Fricker, the idea that people’s knowledge can be discounted or treated unfairly because of their social identity has a longer history in Black feminist thought (McKinnon 2016). But Fricker’s (2007) distinction between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice is particularly helpful for understanding how these wrongs occur. Testimonial injustice arises when someone’s account is accorded less credibility or dismissed because of prejudice or stereotypes about their social identity. A familiar example is the Black migrant with sickle cell anaemia whose reports of pain are ignored by healthcare professionals because they are stereotyped as having a higher pain threshold. Hermeneutical injustice, by contrast, occurs when there is a ‘gap in our shared tools of social interpretation’ – that is, when a person lacks the concepts needed to make sense of, or communicate, their experience. For example, a dyslexic migrant student who has never received a formal diagnosis may struggle to explain their learning difficulties, both in their home and host country. We explore these forms of epistemic injustice in greater detail below.

Testimonial injustice at the intersection of migration and disability

Studies suggest that asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants with mental health conditions or intellectual disabilities are often not trusted or listened to Soldatic and Fiske (2009; Quinn 2014). Their credibility may be further undermined in countries with particularly hostile attitudes towards migration. This pattern is reflective of testimonial injustice as their accounts are discounted because of prejudice about their social identity. Some examples from Soldatic and Fiske’s (2009) work on wrongful detentions of people with disabilities in Australia, many of whom were migrants, similarly reflects testimonial injustice. One such case concerns Vivian Alvarez Solon, a woman with a mental health condition who was deported to the Philippines despite repeatedly giving her correct name and date of birth and stating that she was an Australian citizen. Although Vivian was of Filipino ancestry, she had migrated to Australia, where she had lived for eighteen years. Despite her accurate testimony, immigration officers failed to conduct a thorough database search and instead assumed, without evidence, that she had been trafficked as a sex worker. Her testimony was

ascribed lesser credibility because of her positionality as a migrant with disability.

Emerging data from our ongoing research on migration and disability also point to testimonial injustice in workplace contexts. For example, Jack (a pseudonym), a migrant with a long-term bowel disease, reports that ‘...my manager repeatedly dismisses my health-related accounts and I do not believe that this is the experience of my non-migrant colleagues, and this directly impacts my working conditions and sense of belonging’. Experiences such as this illustrate how the experience of testimonial injustice adversely affects migrants with disabilities.

Hermeneutical injustice at the intersection of migration and disability

Migrants with disabilities may also experience hermeneutical injustice as a result of variations in the quality of healthcare systems or the stigma associated with disability in some communities. The absence of robust healthcare systems in some countries may cause some people with disabilities to navigate through their early years and adulthood without a formal diagnosis, especially when their disabilities are not self-evident. The lack of a diagnosis may deprive them of the words or concepts with which to adequately describe their experiences and secure the necessary adjustments. This experience of hermeneutical injustice may continue following migration, as they may lack access to healthcare services in their host country or may be discouraged from seeking appropriate care because of their migrant status, a situation which is particularly likely where there is some hostility towards migrants in the host country (Burns 2017).

Furthermore, the literature suggests that migration systems in many high-income countries rest on ableist assumptions about the ‘ideal’ migrant: employable, healthy, productive, and low-cost (Burns 2017; El-Lahib 2016; Hultman et al. 2025). Residency or work permits are often tied to employment, and employers may discriminate against people with disabilities. In such cases, a migrant with an undiagnosed disability may, for fear of jeopardising their immigration status or employability, hesitate to access healthcare that could provide a diagnosis which would, in turn, equip them with words to describe their experiences and request necessary adjustments. We also envisage situations in which the stigma associated with disability in some communities may serve as a barrier to receiving a diagnosis and accessing appropriate care. In each scenario, migrants with disabilities are deprived of key interpretive resources – diagnostic labels, legal categories, and shared narratives – that would help them name their experiences and seek adjustments (Fricker 2007).

Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the epistemic injustices experienced by migrants with disabilities and has framed existing research in these terms. While the lack of accurate official data has long been recognised, less attention has been paid to two related harms: first, the systematic downgrading of migrants' testimonies because of their social positionality, and second, the ways in which this positionality deprives them of the interpretive tools needed to make sense of, and articulate, their experiences. Testimonial and hermeneutical injustices thus intersect to render migrants with disabilities not only invisible, but also unheard. The hope is that framing these dynamics as an epistemic injustice will stimulate further empirical and theoretical work and prompt responses which are aimed at amplifying the voices of migrants with disabilities, reshaping institutional practices, and rectifying these pervasive injustices.

Ethical approval

The University of Southampton granted ethical approval for the study on 16 May 2024.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Chianu Dibia  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0672-4491>

References

- Amas, N., and J. Lagnado. 2010. "Failing London's Disabled Refugees." *Forced Migration Review* 35: 27–28.
- Berghs, M., and M. Wilkinson. 2026. "Is the Workplace about to Get Better or Worse for Disabled People in the United Kingdom?" *Disability & Society* 41 (1): 276–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2025.2479094>.
- Burns, N. 2017. "The Human Right to Health: Exploring Disability, Migration and Health." *Disability & Society* 32 (10): 1463–1484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1358604>.
- Burns, N. 2019. "Boundary Maintenance: Exploring the Intersections of Disability and Migration." In *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. 2nd ed. edited by N. Watson, A. Roulstone and C. Thomas, 305–320. London: Routledge.
- El-Lahib, Y. 2016. "Troubling Constructions of Canada as a 'Land of Opportunity' for Immigrants: A Critical Disability Lens." *Disability & Society* 31 (6): 758–776. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1200460>.
- Fricker, M. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- GOV.UK. 2025. "Biggest Overhaul of Legal Migration Model in 50 Years Announced." <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/biggest-overhaul-of-legal-migration-model-in-50-years-announced>.
- Hultman, L., E. Asaba, D. Riedel, S. Abdu, H. Afe, R. Atafnu, L. Ejigu, et al. 2025. "Migration and Disability Narratives from an Intersectional Perspective: A Photovoice Study." *Disability & Society* 40 (1): 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2023.2271157>.
- McAuliffe, M., and L.A. Oucho, eds. 2024. *World Migration Report 2024*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- McKinnon, R. 2016. "Epistemic Injustice." *Philosophy Compass* 11 (8): 437–446. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12336>.
- Ned, L., M. Motimele, J. Puar, K. Mohamed, and K. Soldatic. 2025. "Intersectionality's Contestations – Deepening Engagement within the Field." *Disability & Society* 40 (9) : 2612–2617. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2411535>.
- Pratt, T. 2025. "Disabled People Detained by Ice Sound Alarm over Overcrowded Jails." *The Guardian*, 25 April, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/25/ice-immigration-detention>.
- Quinn, N. 2014. "Participatory Action Research with Asylum Seekers and Refugees Experiencing Stigma and Discrimination: The Experience from Scotland." *Disability & Society* 29 (1): 58–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.769863>.
- Scheer, E. Asaba, T. Buerk, M. Guerrero, and M. Mondaca. 2025. "Striving in Uncertainty: How Disabled Refugee Women Negotiate Everyday Activities and Participation." *Disability & Society* 40 (8): 2102–2126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2407816>.
- Soldatic, K., and L. Fiske. 2009. "Bodies 'Locked Up': Intersections of Disability and Race in Australian Immigration." *Disability & Society* 24 (3): 289–301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590902789453>.
- Watermeyer, B., and L. Swartz. 2023. "Disability and the Problem of Lazy Intersectionality." *Disability & Society* 38 (2): 362–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2130177>.
- Yhnell, R., and T. De La Mare. 2025. "Fears City 'Going Backwards' amid Racial Tension." *BBC*, 25 September, 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cp8jz8q6jejo>.