

DETERMINANTS AND INCOME DIFFERENTIALS BETWEEN WORKERS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES IN THE FORMAL LABOR MARKET OF RIO GRANDE DO NORTE

Determinantes e diferenciais de rendimentos entre trabalhadores com e sem deficiência no mercado formal do Rio Grande do Norte

Determinantes y diferenciales de ingresos entre trabajadores con y sin discapacidad en el mercado formal de Rio Grande do Norte



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RESUMO

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This study analyzes wage determinants and income differentials between workers with and without disabilities in the formal labor market of the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Based on Human Capital Theory and Theories of Discrimination, the research uses a quantitative approach using microdata from the 2023 Annual Social Information Report. The salary structure was analyzed through Mincerian regressions and the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. The results reveal that, contrary to the national outlook, workers with disabilities in the formal market of Rio Grande do Norte have a slightly higher average hourly wage. However, the analysis of wage premiums points to counterintuitive results: people with disabilities face an intersectional penalty for race three times higher and do not obtain a return on experience, although they benefit from public sector jobs. The Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition showed that the average wage difference between groups has no statistical significance. It is concluded that the absence of wage discrimination suggests equitable remuneration for people with disabilities who manage to access the formal market in the state. Thus, the evidence indicates that the critical challenge in Rio Grande do Norte lies not in internal remuneration, but in the barriers to access to formal employment, such as high informality and educational deficits that restrict the insertion of these workers in the job market.

Keywords: People with Disabilities; Income Differentials; Employment Discrimination; Human Capital.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa os determinantes salariais e os diferenciais de rendimentos entre trabalhadores com e sem deficiência no mercado de trabalho formal do estado do Rio Grande do Norte. Fundamentada na Teoria do Capital Humano e nas Teorias da Discriminação, a pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem quantitativa com base nos microdados da Relação Anual de Informações Sociais de 2023. A análise da estrutura salarial foi conduzida por meio de regressões mincerianas e da decomposição de Oaxaca-Blinder. Os resultados revelam que, ao contrário do panorama nacional, os trabalhadores com deficiência no mercado formal potiguar apresentam salário-hora médio ligeiramente superior. Contudo, a análise dos prêmios salariais aponta resultados contraintuitivos: pessoas com deficiência enfrentam uma penalidade interseccional por raça três vezes maior e não obtêm retorno sobre a experiência, embora sejam beneficiadas por vínculos no setor público. A decomposição de Oaxaca-Blinder demonstrou que a diferença salarial média entre os grupos não possui significância estatística. Conclui-se que a ausência de discriminação salarial sugere uma remuneração equitativa para as pessoas com deficiência que logram acessar o mercado formal no estado. Assim, as evidências indicam que o desafio crítico no Rio Grande do Norte não reside na remuneração interna, mas nas barreiras de acesso ao emprego formal, como a alta informalidade e os déficits educacionais que restringem a inserção desses trabalhadores.

Palavras-chave: Pessoas com Deficiência; Diferenciais de Rendimentos; Discriminação no Emprego; Capital Humano.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza los determinantes salariales y los diferenciales de ingresos entre trabajadores con y sin discapacidad en el mercado laboral formal del estado de Rio Grande do Norte. Basada en la Teoría del Capital Humano y las Teorías de la Discriminación, la investigación utiliza un enfoque cuantitativo con microdatos de la Relación Anual de Informaciones Sociales de 2023. La estructura salarial se analizó mediante regresiones mincerianas y la descomposición de Oaxaca-Blinder. Los resultados revelan que, a diferencia del panorama nacional, los trabajadores con discapacidad en el mercado formal potiguar presentan un salario promedio por hora ligeramente superior. Sin embargo, el análisis de las primas salariales apunta a resultados contraintuitivos: las personas con discapacidad enfrentan una penalidad interseccional por raza tres veces mayor y no obtienen retorno por la experiencia, aunque se benefician de empleos en el sector público. La descomposición de Oaxaca-Blinder demostró que la diferencia salarial promedio entre los grupos no tiene significancia estadística. Se concluye que la ausencia de discriminación salarial sugiere una remuneración equitativa para las personas con discapacidad que logran acceder al mercado formal en el estado. Así, las evidencias indican que el desafío crítico en Rio Grande do Norte no reside en la remuneración interna, sino en las barreras de acceso al empleo formal, como la alta informalidad y los déficits educativos que restringen la inserción de estos trabajadores.

Palabras clave: Personas con Discapacidad; Diferenciales de Ingresos; Discriminación en el Empleo; Capital Humano.

1 INTRODUCTION

In a country where inclusion policies have advanced, a concerning wage discrepancy affecting persons with disabilities (PWDs) still persists. The struggle for equal access to employment opportunities and fair compensation for this population is an ongoing



challenge, often exacerbated by a complex array of physical, social, and educational barriers. This challenge is not merely a matter of social justice, but an economic imperative; the exclusion of millions of individuals from the productive labor market represents a significant loss of human capital and consumption potential for the nation (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019).

Historically, the approach to disability was dominated by a medical model, which viewed it as an individual health problem. However, recent legal and theoretical frameworks, such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Brazil, and the Brazilian Inclusion Law (LBI, Law No. 13,146/2015) itself, have consolidated the social model. This model redefines disability not as an individual limitation, but as the result of the interaction between long-term impairments and the barriers imposed by society (World Health Organization, 2021). It is, therefore, society's failure to provide accessibility and equity that generates "disability" as a social and economic phenomenon.

In Brazil, the main legislative advancement in addressing labor market barriers was the implementation of employment quotas, specifically Law No. 8,213/91. This law mandates companies with 100 or more employees to fill 2% to 5% of their positions with persons with disabilities or rehabilitated beneficiaries. Although this legislation has undeniably been the primary driver of formal employment for PWDs in recent decades, effective integration and wage equity remain distant goals for many.

The literature investigating the application of this law points to a problematic implementation. Many organizations comply with the quota reactively, solely to avoid sanctions, in a process that Ribeiro and Carneiro (2009) defined as "unwanted inclusion". Companies frequently allege difficulties in finding qualified candidates while simultaneously failing to implement necessary workplace adaptations and combat employer attitudes (Silva; Helal, 2017). As a result, even when formally employed, PWDs are frequently allocated to low-complexity, low-paying positions with little prospect for career advancement, serving merely to achieve statistical compliance with the law.

It is within this context of apparent contradiction – a progressive legal framework versus a reality of persistent exclusion – that empirical data becomes essential. The most recent and comprehensive overview of the situation of PWDs in Brazil was provided by the 2022 Continuous National Household Sample Survey (Continuous PNAD), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The data revealed an alarming scenario.

On the educational front, a primary barrier, the illiteracy rate among this population



stood at 19.5%, a figure nearly five times higher than that of the population without disabilities (4.1%). This educational disadvantage is even more pronounced across regional breakdowns: the Northeast region presents the highest proportion of persons with disabilities with no formal education, reaching 31.2%. As Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1962) predicts, this educational deficit has direct implications for employability and earnings, given that marginal labor productivity and productive efficiency are tied to the stock of qualifications accumulated by the individual. However, 2022 PNAD data reveals an even more complex phenomenon: even when the educational barrier is overcome, labor market insertion is not guaranteed. Only 51.2% of persons with disabilities holding a higher education degree were employed (IBGE, 2023).

This statistical figure strongly suggests that other barriers, operating independently of human capital, are decisive factors. From the perspective of Discrimination Theories, such barriers reflect both taste-based discrimination (Becker, 1971), rooted in employer prejudice, and statistical discrimination (Phelps, 1972), in which the market penalizes the individual based on stereotypes of average group productivity. The literature corroborates this view, pointing out that prejudice and discrimination on the part of employers (Silva; Helal, 2017), as well as companies' resistance to adapting processes and the tendency to treat hiring as a mere legal obligation through "unwanted inclusion," constrain the hiring of qualified professionals (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009). Even when hiring occurs in the formal sector, studies that decompose wages (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019) find evidence of discrimination (an unexplained wage gap), proving that the market fails to equitably remunerate this group's human capital.

On the labor front, evidence reveals that, even when employed, persons with disabilities tend to earn lower wages compared to their colleagues without disabilities (Johnson; Lambrinos, 1985; IBGE, 2023). This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to high precarity. More than half of the employed population with disabilities (55%) is engaged in informal work. These workers are beyond the reach of the Quota Law and any labor law protections, earning, on average, 30% less than persons without disabilities (IBGE, 2023), with this wage gap being even more pronounced among women. This scenario of informality and low wages is complex, linked to factors that include lower levels of formal education, mobility restrictions, prejudice, and a structural concentration in economic activities with lower value-added (Silva; Helal, 2017).

Although these are national realities, they manifest in distinct ways across different localities. From a regional perspective, the Northeast exhibits the highest percentage of



persons with disabilities in the country (10.3%). Paradoxically, despite being the region with the highest proportion of PWDs, the Northeast employs this population the least, with a labor force participation rate of only 26.8% (IBGE, 2023).

It is within this epicenter of inequality – the Northeast – that the state of Rio Grande do Norte (RN) emerges as a relevant case study. In the state, statistics reflect specificities that warrant attention. With nearly 10% of its population having some form of disability, RN faces the same national challenges, and despite efforts in inclusion and job training programs, the wage reality for these workers is still marked by significant heterogeneities (Silva; Helal, 2017; Coutinho; Azevedo, 2019; IBGE, 2023).

The economic structure of RN, with strong representation in the services and tourism sector, could, in principle, offer fertile ground for labor inclusion. However, barriers to effective inclusion extend beyond sectoral opportunities and include the aforementioned accessibility issues and, specifically, employer perception and attitudes (Silva; Helal, 2017; Coutinho; Azevedo, 2019).

This sectoral configuration gives the state a particular labor dynamic, as the services and tourism market is characterized by high turnover and demands for functional standardization—elements frequently permeated by ableist barriers (Silva; Helal, 2017). Furthermore, the potiguar economic arrangement imposes a strong centralization of opportunities and Quota Law enforcement actions in the Natal Metropolitan Area, generating a chronic socio-spatial asymmetry in the inland expansion of formal employment for workers with disabilities (Coutinho; Azevedo, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the central question of this research emerges. On one hand lies the national picture, outlined by Continuous PNAD data, showing exclusion, high informality, and a 30% wage gap disfavoring PWDs. On the other hand, lies the formal labor market, captured by the Annual Social Information Report (RAIS), where the Quota Law operates directly (Brasil, 1991). What happens to workers with disabilities who overcome entry barriers and manage to access this formal market? Does the national wage disadvantage persist within formal firms in RN?

Almost all of the quantitative literature on income differentials for PWDs in Brazil focuses on national-level analyses (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019; Neri; Pinto; Soares, 2003). The study by Castro, Moreira, and Silva (2019), in particular, used the same database (RAIS) and found evidence of wage discrimination against PWDs at the national level, even in the formal sector. This research, therefore, is justified by the need for a regionalized analysis, investigating whether national patterns are replicated in the potiguar context.



In this context, this study aims to analyze wage determinants and income differentials between workers with and without disabilities in the state of Rio Grande do Norte, focusing exclusively on the formal labor market, based on microdata from the 2023 RAIS.

2 THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Conceptualization of disability and labor market barriers

Disability is defined, according to Brazilian legislation, as any condition that limits a person's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Brazil follows the parameters established by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), ratified in 2008, and by the Brazilian Inclusion Law (LBI), Law No. 13,146/2015, which regulates the rights of persons with disabilities in the country. According to this legislation, a Person with Disabilities (PWD) is one who presents long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when interacting with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society.

The World Health Organization (WHO) also defines disability as an umbrella term encompassing a wide diversity of conditions, including physical, sensory, mental, and intellectual impairments, which can range from mild to severe. The WHO adopts a social approach to disability, emphasizing that it is the interaction between a person's health conditions and social, architectural, and attitudinal barriers that defines the degree of social inclusion (World Health Organization, 2021).

From the perspective of disability studies, this social approach is challenged by demonstrating that the concept of "work capacity" is not neutral, but rather a socio-spatial construction shaped by market demands for performance and standardization, which tends to label functionally divergent bodies as "unproductive" even prior to their labor market insertion.

Globally, statistics indicate that about 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, representing more than 1 billion people. In Brazil, according to the 2010 IBGE Census, approximately 24% of the population presented some form of disability, although this indicator was revised by the institute itself in 2018 to around 6.7% upon aligning with the international guidelines of the Washington Group, which restrict measurement to severe degrees of limitation. The United Nations (UN) considers that, beyond health



conditions, disabilities are deeply linked to social inequalities, making it necessary to promote public policies that ensure the full inclusion of these individuals in the labor market, education, and social life.

Access to the labor market for PWDs faces specific challenges. Physical barriers, such as the lack of ramps or elevators, hinder accessibility to the workplace. Furthermore, the absence of adequate assistive technologies, such as screen-reading software or adapted equipment, prevents the inclusion of PWDs in roles requiring these tools (Silva *et al.*, 2025). The UN (2022) reports that globally, access to these technologies – which are essential for productivity and participation – is denied to a vast proportion of the population that needs them.

In the educational field, the training of persons with disabilities is often limited. Data from IBGE (2023) confirm that persons with disabilities have, on average, significantly lower levels of education than the population without disabilities, which reduces qualification options and increases the difficulties of entering the labor market (Maciel, 2024).

Socially, the stigma that PWDs are less productive persists, resulting in discrimination during the selection process. The Quota Law itself, although the primary vector of formal inclusion, faces immense resistance from companies, which often view it as "unwanted inclusion," adopting strategies to circumvent or minimize mandatory hiring (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009). This compromises effective inclusion and the quality of the positions offered.

2.2 Theoretical foundations: human capital and discrimination

Human Capital Theory, popularized by Becker (1962) and Mincer (1974), postulates that an individual's wages are determined by their productive endowments. Investments in education (schooling) and training (on-the-job experience) increase worker productivity and, consequently, their earnings. The Mincerian equation, utilized in this study, is the standard empirical tool for estimating the returns to these investments. In this view, wage differences between groups (such as PWDs and non-PWDs) would be justified if average differences in these productive characteristics existed. For example, if the PWD group possesses, on average, lower educational attainment or less experience, Human Capital Theory would expect their wages to be correspondingly lower.

This causal nexus is widely challenged by contemporary labor economics, which points to a severe limitation in Mincer and Becker's theory for assuming a universal standard



worker; it overlooks that accessibility barriers and structural ableism alter the conversion dynamics of these attributes, preventing investments in education from generating symmetric rates of return for workers with and without disabilities (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019; Silva; Helal, 2017).

Ableism, understood as structural prejudice that predetermines the inferiority and invalidity of functionally divergent bodies, operates in the labor market by a priori labeling workers with disabilities as less productive, subverting the meritocratic logic of human capital and justifying barriers to compensation and career advancement (Silva; Helal, 2017).

However, Human Capital Theory does not explain the entirety of wage differentials. When a wage gap persists after controlling for observable productive characteristics, Discrimination Theory comes into play. Becker's (1971) seminal work on the "taste for discrimination" suggests that employers, coworkers, or customers may have a preference (prejudice) against interacting with a specific group, being willing to pay a "cost" to avoid this interaction – whether by paying lower wages to the discriminated group or higher wages to the preferred group.

Alternatively, "statistical discrimination," proposed by Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1973), argues that discrimination can occur even without prejudice (taste). Employers possess imperfect information regarding a candidate's actual productivity. If they believe that, on average, workers from a certain group (such as PWDs) are less productive (perhaps due to stigmas or lower average educational attainment), they may offer a lower wage to all members of that group, including those who are individually highly productive.

The Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition (Oaxaca, 1973; Blinder, 1973) is the methodology that operationalizes these two theories. It divides the total wage gap into two parts: the explained component, which measures the portion of the gap due to differences in average human capital endowments (such as schooling, experience, sector of activity); and the unexplained component, which captures differences in the returns to these endowments. This second component is frequently interpreted as a proxy for discrimination (whether taste-based or statistical), reflecting the unequal treatment of individuals with the same productive qualifications.

Additionally, contemporary approaches to wage structure have incorporated the perspective of intersectionality to understand how different social markers of oppression interact in a non-additive manner. In the Brazilian labor market, the fusion of disability and race engenders a "hyper-disadvantage," in which ableist barriers and structural racism overlap and mutually reinforce each other. Studies such as those by Castro, Moreira, and



Silva (2019) and Silva and Helal (2017) indicate that the earnings penalty imposed by the market is not evenly distributed among persons with disabilities, being markedly aggravated when multiple stigmatized characteristics converge in the same individual, which further restricts the economic return on their productive attributes.

2.3 Empirical studies on disability and earnings

International empirical literature applying this methodology consistently finds a wage gap disfavoring persons with disabilities. One of the pioneering studies, Johnson and Lambrinos (1985), already used data from the United States of America (USA) to estimate that nearly one-third of the wage differential for men and half for women with disabilities could be attributed to discrimination. More recent studies in Europe, the United Kingdom, and Australia continue to identify a significant "disability wage gap," even after controlling for a broad set of human capital and occupational variables.

In Brazil, studies based on broad household surveys, such as the Demographic Census or the National Household Sample Survey (PNAD), which capture both the formal and informal sectors, tend to find a strong disadvantage for the population with disabilities. Neri, Pinto, and Soares (2003), in one of the most influential "portraits of disability" using the 2000 Census, already pointed to much lower income and employment levels. More recently, Castro, Moreira, and Silva (2019), using RAIS, analyzed wage differentials at the national level. They identified that, even in the formal labor market, workers with disabilities in Brazil had significantly lower earnings and that a substantial portion of this gap was not explained by productive characteristics, pointing to discrimination.

The formal labor market is the primary sphere of operation for the Quota Law for Persons with Disabilities (Law No. 8,213/91). This law mandates companies with 100 or more employees to fill between 2% and 5% of their positions with rehabilitated beneficiaries or persons with disabilities.

Literature evaluating the Quota Law shows that it was, undeniably, the primary driver for increasing the formal employability of PWDs in Brazil (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009). However, these same authors and others point out that compliance with the law is frequently "quantitative" rather than "qualitative." Companies hire to reach the minimum quota, often placing workers with disabilities in lower-prestige, lower-paying positions with limited prospects for career advancement, merely to avoid fines.

It is within this context of the regulated formal market that wage differential studies



become particularly interesting. The study by Castro, Moreira, and Silva (2019) serves as a direct parallel to this research, as they also utilized RAIS microdata and the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition for Brazil. Their national-level findings indicated that, even in the formal sector, there was a wage differential disfavoring PWDs, a significant portion of which was unexplained (potential discrimination).

2.4 Research gap: regional heterogeneity and the case of RN

Nearly all quantitative literature on earnings differentials for PWDs in Brazil focuses on national-level analyses (Neri; Pinto; Soares, 2003; Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019) or, at most, major regions (Marques *et al.*, 2024). Brazil, however, is a country of extreme structural heterogeneity, and the labor market in the Northeast does not operate under the same dynamics as other regions. Marques *et al.* (2024), for example, analyzing the inclusion of PWDs in the state of Ceará, focused on inclusion patterns and access barriers to the formal market, noting major disparities between the capital city and the cities in the interior of the state. This suggests that regional dynamics are distinct.

Therefore, the gap that this study proposes to fill is the absence of a wage decomposition analysis focused specifically on the state of Rio Grande do Norte. It remains unknown whether the national pattern of wage discrimination in the formal sector, identified by Castro, Moreira, and Silva (2019), is replicated in the potiguar context. It is possible that the economic structure of RN, with a strong weight in the services sector and a unique implementation of quota policies and labor inspection, yields a distinct result.

Thus, this research is justified by shifting the analytical lens from the national to the state level. By applying the Mincer and Oaxaca-Blinder methodology to the 2023 RAIS microdata for RN, this article seeks to identify whether wage differentials between workers with and without disabilities in the potiguar formal labor market are explained by human capital endowments or whether an unexplained component persists, indicative of discrimination, thereby contributing localized evidence to the public policy debate on inclusion.

3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This research is characterized by a quantitative approach of an empirical-analytical and descriptive nature. The methodological design is based on the estimation of



econometric models to evaluate earnings disparities from the perspective of Economic Geography and labor relations.

For the development of this study, the Annual Social Information Report (RAIS) was employed as the primary data source, specifically using the microdata dataset for the year 2023, the most recent available with fully disclosed and updated information. RAIS is an annual information collection system coordinated by the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MTE), standing out as the most comprehensive database on formal employment in Brazil.

The sampling procedure assumes a census character regarding the formal labor market, given that RAIS microdata capture the universe of formal private-sector and statutory employment contracts. It is acknowledged that the methodological focus on the formal sector imposes an inherent selection bias on the analysis, considering that persons with disabilities face severe structural barriers to entry, often being pushed into inactivity or informality. This macroeconomic and demographic panorama of access inequalities was duly contextualized in the introductory sections based on PNADC indicators. However, it should be emphasized that the PNADC plays a strictly contextual role in this study, as Mincerian regressions and the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition are estimated exclusively using RAIS data. Chart 01 presents the descriptions of the variables constructed and utilized in this study.

Chart 01 – Description of variables

Type	Variable	Description
dependent	logarithm of hourly earnings	Logarithm of weekly earnings divided by weekly hours worked
explanatory	female	Takes a value of 1 if the individual is female, and 0 otherwise
	age	Worker's age in years
	age squared	Age raised to the square
	experience	Worker's tenure in completed months
	experience squared	Length of employment squared
	non-white race	Takes a value of 1 if the person self-identifies as non-white, and 0 otherwise
	public sector	Takes a value of 1 if the individual is a public sector worker, and 0 otherwise
	metropolitan area	Takes a value of 1 if the individual works in the Natal metropolitan area, and 0 otherwise
	education controls	Takes a value of 1 if the individual falls into the specific educational attainment category (illiterate, literate, completed middle school, completed high school, completed higher education, and postgraduate studies), and 0 otherwise

Source: Author's elaboration based on RAIS microdata.



To capture the effects of each wage component, an earnings equation based on Mincer (1974) was employed. The Mincerian equation traditionally models the impact of human capital on earnings. In this adaptation, the equation is modified to incorporate the specific variables defined in Chart 1. The earnings equation is specified as follows:

$$\ln(Y) = \beta_0 + \sum \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Where $\ln(Y_i)$ is the natural logarithm of hourly earnings; the terms X_i represent the variables described in Chart 1; and each β_i is a coefficient that estimates the effect of the corresponding variable X_i on earnings. The "illiterate" category was defined as the omitted reference category for the education controls. Furthermore, aggregating race or color into the "non-white race" category is justified by the sample constraints of the regional and sectoral scope; fragmentation into official IBGE categories would substantially inflate standard errors, rendering statistical significance unfeasible for the subgroup of persons with disabilities.

To identify earnings differentials between workers with and without disabilities, the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition was employed. Developed by Oaxaca (1973) and Blinder (1973), it is generally used to decompose mean earnings differences among workers when structural inequalities are suspected, such as across genders, races, or job types. The decomposition is expressed as:

$$\Delta Y = (\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2) \hat{\beta} + (\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2) \bar{X}_2 \quad (2)$$

Where ΔY explicitly denotes the difference in the mean natural logarithms of earnings between the analyzed groups. To operationalize the decomposition, the group of workers without disabilities was adopted as the reference "price" structure (coefficients) for constructing the non-discriminatory counterfactual.

In Expression (2), the term $(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2) \hat{\beta}$ measures the contribution of differences in characteristics between the two groups to the total earnings gap, while $(\hat{\beta}_1 - \hat{\beta}_2) \bar{X}_2$ captures the difference that cannot be explained by observable characteristics; that is, the decomposition identifies the contribution of observable and unobservable characteristics (such as discrimination or unmeasured skills) to wage disparities.

While the explained part of the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition can be attributed to observable differences in skills and attributes, the unexplained part is frequently interpreted as indicative of discrimination. In the context of this study, the unexplained component may suggest the existence of wage discrimination related to workers with disabilities.

4 PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The central objective of this research is to analyze the determinants and earnings differentials between workers with and without disabilities in the formal labor market of Rio Grande do Norte. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables.

The results in Table 1 show that, in terms of hourly earnings, workers with disabilities have a mean wage of R\$ 17.84, while those without disabilities earn an average of R\$ 15.99 per hour. This difference, representing approximately 11.54%, suggests that workers with disabilities in the potiguar formal labor market are in a slightly more advantageous position regarding compensation.

This particular result represents the primary paradox of the study, as it contradicts the national panorama of exclusion. Continuous PNAD data (IBGE, 2023) point to a 30% wage disadvantage against PWDs in the overall labor market (formal and informal). The reversal of this sign in the potiguar formal market suggests that the group of workers with disabilities who overcome entry barriers and gain access to formal employment possesses characteristics distinct from the national average (Silva; Helal, 2017).

However, deepening the descriptive analysis through the behavior of medians demystifies this apparent paradox and reveals severe intragroup heterogeneity. While the mean wage of PWDs is inflated by a tail of very high earnings at the far right of the distribution – a pattern evidenced by the substantial standard deviation (R\$ 48.00) and group skewness – the median hourly wage of persons with disabilities stands at R\$ 8.15, a value lower than the R\$ 8.47 recorded for workers without disabilities. This result demonstrates that the supposed wage advantage does not hold for the majority of workers in this segment.

The divergence between the mean and the median confirms that the formal labor market in RN concentrates the majority of PWDs in low-paying positions and at the base of the wage pyramid – a pattern typical of passive and formal compliance with the Quota Law, leaving high salaries restricted to a minority allocated in occupational ghettos or protected by public sector pay parity (IBGE, 2023; Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009; Silva; Helal, 2017).

Table 01 – Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variables	Workers with disabilities				Workers without disabilities			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
hourly earnings	17,84	48,00	2,00	1573,20	15,98	35,73	1,61	3047,04
female	0,3366	0,4726	0	1	0,4058	0,4910	0	1



age	39,21	10,43	16	75	37,14	11,20	14	75
experience	61,77	70,20	1	480,00	56,03	82,42	1	480,00
non-white race	0,7789	0,4150	0	1	0,8088	0,3932	0	1
public sector	0,0700	0,2500	0	1	0,1655	0,3717	0	1
metropolitan area	0,7121	0,4528	0	1	0,5483	0,4977	0	1
illiterate	0,0563	0,2305	0	1	0,0345	0,1824	0	1
literate	0,0857	0,2800	0	1	0,0582	0,2341	0	1
middle school	0,1397	0,3467	0	1	0,1196	0,3245	0	1
high school	0,5731	0,4947	0	1	0,6121	0,4873	0	1
higher education	0,1390	0,3459	0	1	0,1682	0,3740	0	1
postgraduate	0,0062	0,0788	0	1	0,0074	0,0856	0	1
observations	7.210				746.794			

Source: Author's elaboration based on RAIS microdata.

The analysis of the remaining variables in Table 1 helps characterize these groups and deepens the paradox. Regarding gender, the proportion of women among workers with disabilities is lower (33.66%) compared to 40.58% among those without disabilities. In addition, the mean age of workers with disabilities is 39.21 years, slightly higher than the average of 37.14 years for workers without disabilities, indicating a slightly more mature workforce.

Regarding experience, workers with disabilities present an average of 61.77 months, higher than the 56.03 months for workers without disabilities. This suggests that workers with disabilities tend to remain longer in their jobs, a result that may be related both to lower turnover and to potential stagnation in entry-level positions, as suggested by the literature on "unwanted inclusion" (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009).

In the public sector, a lower proportion of workers with disabilities (7%) is employed compared to those without disabilities (16.55%). This finding is particularly relevant, as the public sector is known for offering higher wages and stability, suggesting that the higher mean wage of PWDs is not due to greater participation in this sector. A higher proportion of workers with disabilities (71.21%) is also observed to be located in the Natal Metropolitan Area, compared to 54.83% of workers without disabilities, indicating an expected concentration of job opportunities and Quota Law enforcement in the capital.

The results regarding educational attainment presented in Table 1 confirm these structural barriers. While the proportion of workers with high school, higher education, and postgraduate education is higher among those without disabilities, workers with disabilities present a higher proportion of illiterate individuals (5.63% vs. 3.45%) and those with only



middle school education (13.97% vs. 11.96%). This result aligns with the national scenario of chronic educational barriers (IBGE, 2023; Maciel, 2024). Table 02 presents the results for the estimated wage premiums for both worker groups.

Table 02 – Comparative wage premiums between workers with and without disabilities in Rio Grande do Norte

Variables	Workers with disabilities	Workers without disabilities
female	– 0,1466*** (0,0151)	– 0,1721*** (0,0014)
age	0,0242*** (0,0043)	0,0265*** (0,0004)
age squared	– 0,0002*** (0,0001)	– 0,0003*** (0,0001)
experience	– 0,0002 (0,0003)	0,0019*** (0,0001)
experience squared	0,0001*** (0,0001)	0,0001*** (0,0001)
non-white race	– 0,1701*** (0,0205)	– 0,0510*** (0,0019)
public sector	0,4144*** (0,0394)	0,1388*** (0,0023)
metropolitan area	– 0,1451*** (0,0176)	0,0521*** (0,0014)
literate	– 0,0630* (0,0375)	– 0,0498*** (0,0040)
middle school	0,0076 (0,0362)	0,0834*** (0,0036)
high school	0,1086*** (0,0337)	0,1722*** (0,0034)
higher education	0,9154*** (0,0478)	0,8744*** (0,0042)
postgraduate	1,1212*** (0,1341)	1,3818*** (0,0123)
constant	1,8251*** (0,0881)	1,4653*** (0,0078)
R ²	0,3203	0,3274
observations	7.210	746.794

Source: Authors' elaboration based on estimation results.

Notes: Significance () < 1%; () < 5%; () < 10%. Robust standard errors of the estimates in parentheses.

The results in Table 02 indicate that wage premiums and penalties are not uniform, revealing how the potiguar labor market values (or devalues) worker characteristics in distinct ways. The worker's sex, for instance, significantly influences earnings in both groups.



Being female is associated with a wage reduction of approximately 14.66% for workers with disabilities and an even larger reduction, of 17.21%, for those without disabilities. Although both scenarios highlight a clear disparity, the fact that the penalty is slightly smaller for women with disabilities is a first indication that the compensation structures for this group follow their own distinct logic.

Regarding age and experience, age shows the expected pattern of wage growth and decline over a worker's career. However, for workers with disabilities, the experience parameter was not statistically significant. While workers without disabilities see their accumulated experience rewarded with a positive wage premium, the same does not occur for workers with disabilities. This indicates that, for this group, other factors are more determinant for wage progression. This result provides robust statistical evidence that directly aligns with the literature on "unwanted inclusion" (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009). This suggests that workers with disabilities are hired (often to comply with the Quota Law) but may face career stagnation; their job tenure does not translate into higher perceived productivity or career advancement, unlike their peers.

In contrast, the employment sector emerges as an equalizing factor. Being employed in the public sector offers a substantially higher wage premium for persons with disabilities (41.44%) compared to those without disabilities (13.89%). This result is fundamental to understanding the paradox in Table 1 (where PWDs earn more). Inclusion policies through civil service examinations and the public sector's equal pay structures protect workers with disabilities from discrimination (Becker, 1971; Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019) and from the devaluation of experience observed in the private sector (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009), pulling the average wage of the entire group upward.

The analysis of the "race" variable reveals that being non-white imposes a wage penalty of 17.01% for workers with disabilities, a value substantially more severe than the already significant penalty of 5.10% found for workers without disabilities. This result provides clear empirical evidence of intersectional discrimination: the formal labor market in RN not only penalizes race, but does so in a multiplied manner when the worker also has a disability. This double penalty suggests that discrimination mechanisms—whether taste-based (Becker, 1971) or statistical (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972)—are amplified when multiple stigmatized characteristics are present in the same individual.

This double penalty suggests that discrimination mechanisms – whether taste-based (Becker, 1971) or statistical (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972) – are amplified when multiple stigmatized characteristics are present in the same individual. This empirical pattern



validates Crenshaw's (1989) theoretical framework of intersectionality, demonstrating that the categories of race and disability do not function as independent cumulative axes, but rather as inseparable ones, generating a qualitatively more severe and complex disadvantage in the labor market (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019; Silva; Helal, 2017).

Regarding geographic location, the results in Table 2 present a somewhat counterintuitive finding. While workers without disabilities receive an expected agglomeration premium for working in the Natal Metropolitan Area (+5.21%), workers with disabilities face a penalty of -14.51%. One hypothesis that can be raised is that the enforcement of the Quota Law (Law No. 8,213/91) is more intense in the capital, leading to the filling of positions in low-paying service sectors (such as telemarketing or general services), aligning with the concept of "unwanted inclusion" (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009). In contrast, positions in the interior of the state – likely in the public sector – may, proportionally, offer higher wages, distorting the average.

Although this hypothesis remains at an analytical-speculative level within the current scope, the definitive validation of this socio-spatial pattern demands further investigation. For future research agendas, we suggest formally testing econometric interaction terms between the metropolitan area and the legal status of the sector (public versus private) to verify whether the identified spatial penalty is indeed concentrated in the regulated private market (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009).

Regarding the impact of human capital stock, an "all-or-nothing" dynamic is observed for workers with disabilities. Lower education levels (literate, middle school) do not yield statistically significant returns relative to illiterate workers. This suggests that, at the base of the pyramid, the market does not differentiate this group's human capital, likely allocating them all to entry-level quota positions (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009), regardless of whether they have completed middle school. However, the scenario shifts with higher education. The premium for holding an undergraduate degree is high (+91.54%), being even larger than the premium received by workers without disabilities (+87.44%). This indicates that higher education acts as the primary vector for upward mobility, allowing PWDs to break through the low-qualification quota barrier and access high-paying professional or public sector positions where their human capital appears to be properly valued.

Table 3 presents the results for the estimated wage differentials between workers with and without disabilities.



Table 03 – Wage differentials between workers with and without disabilities in Rio Grande do Norte

Mean hourly earnings			Decomposition components	
Workers with disabilities	Workers without disabilities	Wage difference	Explained	Unexplained
10,8054*** (0,0087)	10,6922*** (0,0957)	0,1132 (0,0088)	0, 9961 (0,0043)	0,9933 (0,0075)
observations			754.004	

Source: Authors' elaboration based on estimation results.

Notes: Significance () < 1%; () < 5%; () < 10%. Robust standard errors of the estimates in parentheses.

The decomposition results presented in Table 03 show that the wage differential between the two groups is not statistically significant. Although the raw mean shown in Table 1 suggested a slight advantage for workers with disabilities, the decomposition reveals that, from a statistical standpoint, this difference is zero. This indicates the absence of systemic wage discrimination (whether positive or negative) between workers with and without disabilities in the formal labor market of Rio Grande do Norte.

It is worth emphasizing, however, that the non-significance of the unexplained component should be interpreted with methodological caution; from an econometric perspective, this finding reveals that no statistical evidence of wage discrimination was identified based on the observable variables controlled for in the model, which does not eliminate the possibility of disparities linked to attributes not measured by the dataset (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019). This is a positive indicator that, once inside the formal sector, inclusion policies – such as equal pay structures in the public sector – may be contributing to a more equitable compensation environment.

However, it is important to interpret this result with due caution. The absence of wage discrimination in no way implies complete equality of opportunity. This is primarily due to the entry "filter" revealed by the Continuous PNAD (IBGE, 2023): high informality (55%), educational barriers (Maciel, 2024), and hiring prejudice (Silva; Helal, 2017). What the RAIS data for RN seem to show is not a fully inclusive labor market, but rather a formal market that fairly compensates the small and select fraction of workers with disabilities who manage to overcome the immense barriers to access. Therefore, the obtained results are limited to this specific statistical subgroup, making it unfeasible to extend the conclusion of wage equity to the entire potiguar labor market, the largest portion of which remains unprotected and informal (IBGE, 2023).



Other factors, such as workplace accessibility, the availability of reasonable accommodations with assistive technologies, and social attitudes toward disability – which often lead to "unwanted inclusion" in low-advancement positions (Ribeiro; Carneiro, 2009) – remain central issues for research and policy action.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study analyzed the wage determinants and earnings differentials between workers with and without disabilities in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. To this end, 2023 RAIS microdata were utilized, applying the Mincerian earnings equation and the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition to analyze the wage structure of these groups.

Descriptive results revealed that workers with disabilities in the potiguar formal sector have a slightly higher average wage. The analysis of wage premiums showed that this group faces a significantly higher intersectional racial penalty and receives no financial return on experience, but benefits strongly from larger wage premiums in the public sector and higher education.

The Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition confirmed the central result: the mean wage difference between the groups was not statistically significant after controlling for productive and socioeconomic characteristics. This result indicates the absence of systemic wage discrimination in the formal labor market of Rio Grande do Norte, signaling that the potiguar formal market equitably compensates the attributes and qualifications of the individuals within it. However, it becomes evident that inequality lies in differential access to such attributes and to formal employment itself, a result that contrasts with national-level studies that used the same dataset (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019).

This divergence from national patterns brings forth explanatory hypotheses of both a temporal and structural nature. From a temporal perspective, the 2023 microdata reflect a scenario of greater regulatory and enforcement maturity regarding the Quota Law and the Brazilian Inclusion Law itself, mitigating gross wage disparities that were captured in earlier periods of the national literature (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019). From a structural standpoint, severe entry barriers and high regional informality generate a strong selection effect, wherein workers with disabilities who overcome the access "filter" into the potiguar formal labor market represent a highly qualified and specific stratum. This group's productive profile, combined with the substantial state public sector wage premiums reported in Table 2, acts as a compensatory mechanism that neutralizes the unexplained wage gap.



This overview demonstrates how the analysis of wage differentials transcends the purely economic dimension and intersects with the debate in Economic and Regional Geography by revealing that the labor market is spatially heterogeneous. The territorial fragmentation of exclusion in the Northeast and the asymmetries in the inland expansion of formal employment shape true geographies of inequality in Rio Grande do Norte, where territorial characteristics operate to condition who gains access to formal labor protection networks.

From this perspective, it is reiterated that the observed absence of wage discrimination is restricted exclusively to the regulated environment of formal employment, such that the overall dynamics of exclusion across the broader labor market must not be downplayed, given that the majority of persons with disabilities remain on the margins of this structure (Castro; Moreira; Silva, 2019; IBGE, 2023).

The results suggest that public policy actions in RN should focus less on wage equity within the formal market, which appears to be relatively equitable, and more on the severe barriers to accessing it, combating educational exclusion and high informality. Additionally, targeted actions in the private sector are needed to address career stagnation (the lack of returns to experience) and to mitigate the severe intersectional wage penalty imposed on non-white workers with disabilities. The absence of returns to experience may be associated with strictly passive compliance with the Quota Law by companies, which tend to restrict the hiring of this segment to operational or entry-level positions for legal compliance purposes, without promoting effective channels for career progression and professional advancement.

Furthermore, this study acknowledges as a methodological limitation the adoption of the traditional functional specification of experience and the non-inclusion of controls for detailed occupations in the Mincerian equation. The absence of more flexible non-linear approaches, such as splines, and the omission of specific occupational barriers prevent distinguishing whether the insignificance of experience is a purely temporal pattern or stems from initial segregation into low-qualification positions, constituting an important agenda for future research to deepen the understanding of career dynamics in the private sector.

Added to this is the inherent limitation regarding the impossibility of strictly causal attribution of discrimination bias through the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. From a metric standpoint, the unexplained component inextricably absorbs both unequal market treatment and the effect of relevant productive attributes omitted by the dataset, which demands analytical caution and precludes strictly causal interpretations of the phenomenon.

In light of this, it is notable that the Quota Law operates under formal racial neutrality,



omitting ethnic-racial criteria from its legislative design. The finding that the racial penalty triples for non-white PWDs highlights the limitations of universal inclusion initiatives, underscoring the urgent need to reformulate public and corporate policies through a strictly intersectional lens – one that connects physical accessibility with ethnic-racial equity.

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