

Voluntariado inclusivo: un estudio sobre la relevancia de los *role models* en la formación de las percepciones de las personas con diversidad funcional

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ES Resumen. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo explorar hasta qué punto los roles models pueden influir en la percepción que tienen las personas con diversidad funcional sobre el voluntariado inclusivo. En concreto, basándose en una metodología cuantitativa, el estudio pretende comprender las prácticas actuales y la posición de las personas con diversidad funcional con respecto al voluntariado, así como los beneficios y las barreras que perciben en el voluntariado inclusivo.

Los datos primarios se recopilaban mediante un cuestionario dirigido a personas con diversidad funcional en Portugal. Los resultados muestran que la participación de las personas con diversidad funcional en actividades de voluntariado es baja, aunque existe un gran interés en participar en el futuro. Las oportunidades de voluntariado se crean principalmente por iniciativa propia de los voluntarios. Las personas con diversidad funcional reconocen varios beneficios asociados al voluntariado, así como una serie de barreras, centrándose en la falta de oportunidades. Se ha observado que la presencia de role models influye en la predisposición al voluntariado inclusivo, pero no en los beneficios y barreras percibidos por las personas con diversidad funcional.

Palabras clave. Voluntariado, voluntariado inclusivo, discapacidad, diversidad funcional, beneficios, barreras, modelos a seguir.

Claves Econlit. L31, O35, J14.

ENG Inclusive volunteering: a study on the relevance of role models in shaping the perceptions of people with functional diversity

ENG Abstract. This investigation aims to explore the extent to which role models are able to influence perceptions of people with functional diversity on inclusive volunteering. Specifically, based on a quantitative methodology, the study aims to understand the current practices and positioning of people with functional diversity towards volunteering, the benefits and barriers they perceive to inclusive volunteering.

Primary data was collected through a questionnaire targeting people with functional diversity in Portugal. The results show that the participation of people with functional diversity in volunteering activities is low, although there is a high interest to get involved in the future. Volunteering opportunities are mainly created through the volunteer's own initiative. People with functional diversity recognize several benefits associated with volunteering, as well as a number of barriers, with a focus on the lack of opportunities. The presence of peer role models has been found to influence the predisposition to inclusive volunteering, but not the perceived benefits and barriers experienced by people with functional diversity.

Keywords. Volunteering, inclusive volunteering, disability, functional diversity, benefits, barriers, role models.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical background. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions; 6. References.

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1. Introduction

This study addresses two interrelated areas that, despite gaining increased attention in recent years, remain understudied, particularly in the Portuguese context: volunteering and disability. Volunteering is a long-standing global practice, generally defined as a set of socially and community-oriented actions carried out by individuals who voluntarily contribute their time and skills without expecting financial compensation (Barbedo & Bandeira, 2015).

The concept of disability has evolved significantly, shifting from a predominantly medical and administrative model to a broader social and political framework. Historically, disability was understood primarily in terms of individual impairments and managed through classification tools such as disability certificates, which welfare states used to allocate support (Stone, 1984). Over time, this approach has been challenged by more inclusive paradigms. The biopsychosocial model, introduced by the World Health Organization in 2001, highlights the dynamic interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors in shaping the experience of disability. This model is most clearly represented by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) (Mota & Bousquat, 2021). More recently, the human rights model has emerged, framing disability as a natural aspect of human diversity. This model emphasizes autonomy, participation, and equality, advocating for legal protections such as reasonable accommodation. It is also informed by the motto “Nothing about us, without us” (Charlton, 2000; Lawson & Beckett, 2021). In Portugal, some disability rights movements have adopted the term “functional diversity” as an alternative to “disability,” aligning with a framework of total inclusivity that recognizes, values, protects, and nurtures diverse identities (Aow et al., 2023).

In Europe, approximately 101 million people live with disabilities – around one in four adults (Eurostat, 2025). According to the Eurostat (2025), nearly 28.8% of people with disabilities were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023. In Portugal, 1.1 million people—representing 10.9% of the population (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021)—live with disabilities and face persistent inequalities in accessing education, employment, healthcare, culture, and civic participation.

Despite increasing attention to disability rights, disability studies remain a relatively new academic field, particularly in Southern Europe. In Portugal, the scholarly literature is still emerging, and research on inclusive volunteering is especially limited (Fontes & Martins, 2023). While the many benefits of volunteering are well documented, individuals with disabilities remain underrepresented in volunteer activities (Li et al., 2018; Marková, 2020). This disparity may stem from various barriers, including accessibility challenges and the lack of visible role models (Chen et al., 2024; Marková, 2020).

Although the influence of role models has been explored in various behavioural contexts—including volunteering (Cinelli & Peralta, 2015; Kukla-Acevedo & Powell, 2024; Wicker & Frick, 2016)—its specific impact on inclusive volunteering remains largely unexplored. This study aims to help fill that gap.

The general objective of this research is to analyse the perceptions of individuals with functional diversity regarding volunteering, with a particular focus on whether these perceptions are influenced by the presence of role models. Specifically, the study investigates their attitudes, perceived benefits, and barriers to volunteering, comparing responses based on the presence or absence of identifiable role models.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework through a review of the relevant literature. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents the results, followed by conclusions and final remarks.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Volunteering, inclusive volunteering and role models

Despite its polysemous nature, international definitions of volunteering share several core elements, namely, that it involves carrying out unpaid activities undertaken for the benefit of the community, the environment, or individuals beyond one’s immediate family or household. Variations arise regarding the term ‘volunteer’ itself, whether to include direct help to individuals or only organizationally mediated activities, how to attribute purpose or motivation, and whether to include the provision of goods as well as services (ILO, 2011). A volunteer, in this context, refers to an individual who spontaneously and without remuneration offers their time, labour, and talents to causes of common interest (Siqueira, 2016).

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2011), volunteering is a form of unpaid work that serves as a renewable resource for addressing social and environmental challenges globally. It contributes significantly to improving quality of life across countries, despite often being undermeasured and undervalued in both economic and policy frameworks.

In recent years, the focus of volunteering research has broadened to include diverse social groups and contexts, such as older adults (Marková, 2020), minority communities (Johnson & Lee, 2015; Paat, 2022), and people with functional diversity (PwFD) (Casseus et al., 2023; Hanlon & Taylor, 2022; Shandra, 2017). One notable development in this area is the emergence of the concept of inclusive volunteering, which refers to the active participation of PwFD in volunteer activities (Gorlova et al., 2020). Inclusive volunteering aims to recognize and harness the often-overlooked capacities of individuals with functional diversity, positioning them as agents of change within their communities rather than as passive recipients of aid.

In Portugal, despite increasing attention to the topic in recent years, overall volunteering rates remain low: 6.4% for formal volunteering and 1.4% for informal volunteering, compared to the European average of 19.4% (INE/CASES, 2019). Within this scenario, it is plausible that persons with functional diversity face

additional, specific barriers to engagement. This context underscores the urgent need for further research.

The concept of inclusive volunteering is grounded in the idea that historically excluded social groups can be active volunteers, not merely beneficiaries of others' efforts (Kruithof et al., 2021; Lindsay & Cancelliere, 2018; Miller et al., 2002). According to Miller et al. (2010), inclusive volunteering recognizes that every individual: i) possesses skills, competences, and talents that can benefit their community; ii) has the right to have their contributions acknowledged; and iii) has the right to participate actively in the development of their community.

Although some studies have addressed inclusive volunteering (e.g., Gorlova et al., 2020; Li et al., 2018), the literature remains scarce, particularly research focused specifically on volunteers with functional diversity (Marková, 2020). Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of volunteering for people from diverse backgrounds, a paradox emerges in the case of individuals with disabilities.

Those responsible for managing volunteers with functional diversity consistently report highly positive experiences. These individuals are often described as committed, hardworking, conscientious, reliable, and motivated to acquire new skills. Nevertheless, the overall percentage of participation in inclusive volunteering remains very low (Miller et al., 2010).

A limited number of studies have specifically focused on volunteering among people with functional diversity (Marková, 2020). Early research concentrated primarily on individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., Arbuckle & Herrick, 2006; Beyer et al., 2016; Choma & Ochocka, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2011; Stroud et al., 2010, as cited in Marková, 2020), aiming to understand how volunteering could provide unique benefits to this population. Subsequent studies expanded the scope to include individuals with physical and sensory disabilities (Hitchings et al., 1998; Hyassat et al., 2016; Lindsay & Yantzi, 2014; van Mechelen et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2003, as cited in Marková, 2020, p. 200). These studies have consistently shown that volunteering can support individuals with disabilities in developing specific skills, routines, and greater independence (Marková, 2020).

However, the majority of this literature reflects the perspectives of those close to the volunteers—such as caregivers, supervisors, or family members—rather than the volunteers themselves (Marková, 2020). In contrast, the study by Marková (2020) adopts a first-person perspective, centring the voices of the volunteers. While the views of volunteers often align with those of the people around them, they also go further in articulating the personal significance of volunteering. Exposure to new environments and challenges allowed participants to engage with unfamiliar experiences, develop new competencies, and gain a deeper awareness of their own capacities. The study highlights positive outcomes in both mental and physical well-being, as well as in personal development.

In addition to individual growth, volunteering was found to offer important social benefits, such as building new relationships, sharing lived experiences, and strengthening social identity through group belonging and collective engagement (Marková, 2020).

In this context, the importance of role and identity should not be underestimated. Volunteering provides a meaningful space for social interaction, where individuals not only contribute to their communities but also actively construct and negotiate their own identities. According to Einolf and Chambré (2011), several factors influence the practice of volunteering, including the broader social context (e.g., external events), social integration (individuals highly engaged in other social activities tend to volunteer more), social roles (including the role of “volunteer” itself and other roles that may enable or inhibit participation), and individual characteristics such as personality traits, motivations, and values.

The processes of socialization and internalisation of values, though often concurrent, are conceptually distinct. Socialization begins in early childhood and typically involves the passive absorption of cultural norms and practices (Titiev, 1963). Internalisation, by contrast, is a more active and selective process, through which individuals adopt specific cultural elements—consciously or unconsciously—based on personal meaning and relevance (Titiev, 1963). Both processes are mediated by agents of socialization, who play a crucial role in shaping behaviour and identity. Among these agents, role models are especially influential, serving as transmitters of social and cultural values across various contexts such as family, school, and peer groups. Whether as part of a person's in-group or an aspirational reference group, role models play a critical role in shaping personal development and social identity (Giddens, 1997).

Role models are widely recognised as powerful sources of motivation. They inspire individuals to adopt new behaviours, pursue goals, and envision possibilities that might otherwise seem out of reach. Their impact has been studied across multiple domains, influencing aspirations, values, and actions (Morgenroth et al., 2015). The concept of role models was first formally introduced by Merton in 1957 and further developed by scholars such as Bandura, whose Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasized the significance of observing and imitating others' behaviour. Since then, the concept has been studied across various academic disciplines, with role models generally defined as individuals from whom we learn skills, behaviours, values, or social roles. They are also seen as representations of what is achievable, offering aspirational examples that can shape one's motivation, goals, and identity (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

More recently, role models have been identified as particularly impactful in shaping volunteering behaviours and attitudes. For instance, a study by Briggs and Cvancara (2015) found that individuals who engage in conversations about volunteering with a greater number of role models tend to report more positive attitudes toward volunteering and higher levels of engagement than those with fewer such interactions.

Role models can take many forms, including parents (Kukla-Acevedo & Powell, 2024; Wiese & Freund, 2011), family members (Stasova, 2017), friends or colleagues (Wolff & Crockett, 2011), or even members of the

broader community (Cinelli & Peralta, 2015) whose behaviour serves as an example. In the specific context of individuals with functional diversity, peers who also have disabilities have been shown to play a particularly significant role in shaping behaviours and fostering empowerment across various domains (Huang et al., 2024; Lindsay & Cancelliere, 2018; Loeper & Schwartz, 2023).

Thus, in the context of inclusive volunteering, peer role models may be especially relevant for understanding how volunteering is adopted and experienced by individuals with functional diversity. Their visibility and participation can serve not only as powerful motivators but also as mechanisms of social inclusion and empowerment within volunteering settings.

Based on the literature, the following research hypothesis and sub-hypothesis are defined:

H1: The existence of peer role models influences the practice of volunteering by people with functional diversity;

H1a: The existence of peer role models influences the current practice of volunteering by people with functional diversity;

H1b: The existence of peer role models influences the predisposition to the practice of volunteering in the future by people with functional diversity;

2.2. Benefits of volunteering

Volunteering is widely recognised as a valuable form of civic and community engagement, offering a range of benefits for both individuals and society. At the individual level, volunteering is associated with increased self-esteem and well-being (Smith, 1997), a stronger sense of identity and belonging (Finn & Checkoway, 1998), improved social relationships (Marková, 2020), and enhanced mental and physical health (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). At the community level, volunteering fosters more resilient and inclusive societies by strengthening civil society organizations, enhancing democratic participation, and improving the representation of marginalized groups.

Volunteering is not only an act of contributing to others; it is also a process of self-development. It enables individuals to use their personal skills and talents to respond to social needs, which can reinforce their sense of purpose and belonging. However, individuals with functional diversity are often excluded from these opportunities and the associated benefits. As Miller et al. (2003) argue, volunteering provides access to vocational and functional skill development, social recognition, and the assumption of new social roles—opportunities often limited or denied to people with disabilities.

While the benefits of volunteering are universal, they may be particularly impactful for social groups traditionally excluded from full participation in society. Individuals with functional diversity frequently encounter barriers to employment, education, and civic life (Melbøe & Hardonk, 2022). In this context, inclusive volunteering emerges not only as a tool for social integration but also as a mechanism for empowerment.

Disability Studies challenge traditional medical and institutional models of disability, which often frame people with disabilities as passive recipients of care (Kruithof et al., 2021; Sellon, 2023). In contrast, a social model of disability emphasizes empowerment and inclusion, positioning individuals as active contributors to society (Winance et al., 2015). This paradigm shift has contributed to the growing recognition that people with functional diversity can themselves be volunteers, rather than merely the beneficiaries of others' volunteer work.

Although research on how disability influences patterns of volunteer participation remain scarce (Shandra, 2017), the existing studies consistently document a wide range of benefits for volunteers with functional diversity (Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Kulik, 2018; Marková, 2020). According to Marková (2020), these benefits include: Exposure to new experiences and environments; Opportunities for self-expression and validation of personal perspectives; Development of managerial and practical skills; Increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-realization; Improvements in physical and mental health; Expanded social networks and relationships; A stronger sense of social identity.

These findings are echoed in evaluations of inclusive volunteering initiatives, such as the Resource Group for Supported Volunteering (RGSV) in Canada (Choma & Ochocka, 2005). This program enabled participants to experience increased autonomy, responsibility, and self-worth (Kulik, 2018), while also challenging prevailing stereotypes and offering more accurate representations of people with disabilities (Hanlon & Taylor, 2022).

Importantly, the benefits of inclusive volunteering are not limited to the individuals directly involved. Organizations that implement inclusive practices often report improvements in team cohesion, organizational efficiency, and reduced stigma and stereotyping toward people with functional diversity (Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Cruz et al., 2023). Inclusive volunteering can also help address persistent challenges within the non-profit sector, particularly regarding volunteer shortages and retention (Miller et al., 2010).

From a broader perspective, volunteering opens pathways to other community opportunities—including employment, leisure, sports, and access to information networks (Marková, 2020; Miller et al., 2002; 2010). These opportunities reinforce the idea that volunteering serves as both a personal and structural mechanism for inclusion.

Finally, the recognition and perceived value of volunteering—and of who is "qualified" to be a volunteer—are shaped by the social context in which individuals are embedded (Conduit et al., 2019). As Wicker and Frick (2016) note, role models play a crucial role in shaping volunteer behaviour, particularly when they are perceived as successful or worthy of imitation. In this way, role models can influence both the decision to

volunteer and the perceived legitimacy of volunteers with functional diversity.

Accordingly, and based on this body of literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The presence of peer role models positively influences the benefits perceived in the practice of volunteering by people with functional diversity.

2.3. Barriers to the practice of volunteering

Despite the widespread adoption of a human rights paradigm, it is well documented that people with functional diversity still face unequal opportunities to reach their full potential. Ableist attitudes persist, including societal tendencies to view disability through a lens of pity or to make unfounded assumptions about individuals' capabilities (Aow et al., 2023). Although academic discourse and policy frameworks have increasingly shifted from a deficit-based model to a strengths-based approach - which recognizes individuals based on their unique abilities and potential (Kersten et al., 2025) - the lived reality often contradicts this ideal. In practice, and despite its well-documented potential to promote inclusion and personal development, volunteering remains largely inaccessible to many individuals with functional diversity (Miller et al., 2010). Even when individuals are highly motivated, skilled, and committed, they continue to be underrepresented in volunteer populations (Miller et al., 2010).

The literature identifies a range of factors that inhibit participation in community initiatives, particularly among marginalized groups. Milner and Kelly (2009) highlight persistent structural, social, and institutional barriers that limit engagement, while the World Health Organization (2011) emphasizes the enduring exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream systems such as education, employment, leisure, sports, and political participation.

In the specific context of volunteering, several barriers further compound this exclusion. These include: i) Lack of acceptance by volunteer organizations, including staff and peers; ii) Inaccessible transportation and physical environments; iii) Volunteer roles that are inadequately designed or not adapted to the needs and capacities of people with functional diversity (Choma & Ochocka, 2005; Miller et al., 2003; Graff & Vedell, 2003). Such obstacles not only hinder initial access to volunteering opportunities but also reduce the potential for long-term engagement and limit the personal and social benefits individuals could gain from participation.

Inclusive volunteering, however, offers a framework for addressing these challenges. It aims to recognize, mobilize, and value the contributions of individuals who are often overlooked as potential community actors. In times of widespread and overlapping crises - a "polycrisis" (Henig & Knight, 2023) - building community capacity through the inclusion of all citizens becomes a strategic and ethical imperative. Inclusive volunteering responds to this need by encouraging organizations to adapt environments, practices, and cultures to promote equity in participation.

Realizing this vision requires a paradigm shift: from viewing people with functional diversity primarily as recipients of services to recognizing them as active contributors and co-creators of community well-being. This shift is essential not only for fostering inclusion but also for redefining the very concept of what it means to volunteer.

In this process of change, the presence of role models can play a transformative role. Research in learning contexts shows that exposure to role models can reduce individuals' intolerance of ambiguity - their discomfort with uncertain or unfamiliar situations - and enhance their willingness to engage in new experiences (Lin et al., 2023). Applied to the context of volunteering, this suggests that seeing peers with functional diversity actively volunteering may reduce psychological and social barriers, offering reassurance, building confidence, and increasing perceived feasibility and motivation to participate.

Based on the available evidence, the following investigation hypothesis can be deduced:

H3: The existence of peer role models positively influences the barriers perceived in the practice of volunteering by people with functional diversity.

3. Methodology

The research question this article aims to address is what is the relevance of role models on the practice of inclusive volunteering. The paper considers as units of analysis PwFD and therefore, the study is based on the perception they have on the field of volunteering. This approach could give special insights about the topics and allows to explore a gap that exist in the literature, as to our best knowledge no previous studies have yet collected information directly with people with functional diversity. As mentioned by Marková (2020), most of the studies are based on the perceptions of professionals.

The specific research objectives of the paper are threefold:

(i) to understand the practices and positioning of people with functional diversity in relation to volunteering and whether it is or not conditioned by role models; (ii) to explore the benefits that people with functional diversity consider that volunteering can or cannot bring and how they are shaped by role models; (iii) to understand the main perceived barriers to volunteering by PwFD and analyse whether they are conditioned by the existence of role models.

The research used a quantitative methodology, based on a questionnaire directed to people with functional diversity.

The questionnaire consisted of closed questions and was divided into three main groups. The first group aimed to assess the respondents' position concerning the practice of inclusive volunteering. The second group included a range of questions to assess the perceived benefits of volunteering, and finally the third group included a range of questions to assess the extent to which different aspects were or were not

perceived as barriers to this type of volunteering.

This questionnaire has been developed according to the following criteria: (i) the objectives of the study; (ii) the existing literature on the subject; and (iii) the report on Recommendations for Public Policies: More Inclusive Volunteering (Gonçalves & Dias, 2023).

From the beginning, the design of the questionnaire included a deep concern about making the questionnaire accessible. This concern was reflected in the language used, the number of questions, scales used (that were limited to a three-point scale, with no mandatory response), and the readability of the platform used (Lime survey). In addition to the accessible text used to describe the different response options, pictograms were also used, particularly for scale questions, in order to make its meaning more understandable. To achieve this goal, close contact was established with institutions working with people with functional diversity during the design, validation, and pre-testing of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was pre-tested by four people with functional diversity, accompanied by two different social economy entities located in different regions of the country. As the result, the pre-test was conducted under the supervision and monitoring of a psychologist and social worker from the institution with whom they are familiar. These professionals closely monitored the main difficulties experienced by respondents, providing researchers with information about questions that needed to be revisited in the writing process for the purpose of accessibility improvement.

Data collection took place between 28 June and 6 October of 2024. The questionnaires were distributed through the networks and email contacts of the organizations involved in the field in Portugal. In total, 67 valid responses were received from people with functional diversity. Whilst the sample size is not ideal for statistical inference testing, it is a valuable achievement from a research point of view. The data source, which is based on direct person perceptions held by people with functional diversity, is very difficult to access. The challenge in the collection of data according to this perspective was, first of all, the difficulty in identifying individuals with functional diversity. The involvement of relevant actors in the social economy in the dissemination of the questionnaire and the encouragement of responses was therefore fundamental. Secondly, the characteristics of some groups of people with functional diversity can hinder the process of responding to the questionnaire, which can result in a lower response or dropout rate during the response process, unless the subjects are highly motivated to participate. The encouragement offered by the organisations accompanying the respondents was a significant factor in achieving such number of participants. Considering the research objectives and hypotheses deduced from the literature, the following variables were considered in the study:

- Independent variable: The presence of role models, which was measured using a binary variable, considering the fact of respondents know other people with functional diversity (peers) who do volunteer work, or not.
- Dependent variables:
 - Variables related to the practice of volunteering by people with functional diversity (nominal variables);
 - Variables concerned with the benefits attached to inclusive volunteering (nominal variables);
 - Variables related to the barriers associated with inclusive volunteering practices (nominal variables).

The data analysis was performed using SPSS software (version 29). A confidence level of 5% was defined as the criterion for the hypothesis test. The internal validity of the collected data is high, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha of 0.9 and 0.826 for the benefits and barriers of volunteering, respectively.

4. Results

4.1. Presence of role models and position towards the practice of inclusive volunteering

The results attained show that about half of the respondents (52,2%) indicate to know other people with functional diversity that perform volunteering activities (Table 1). On the other hand, only 40,3% of the respondents explicitly mentioned that they did not know any disabled people who volunteer.

When analysing the practice of volunteering among people with functional diversity, the majority of respondents (50.7%) have volunteered in the past, even if they don't currently volunteer. Only 22.4% of respondents say they are currently volunteering, and 26.9% say they have never volunteered. Of those who volunteer, most of them were not available to say how often they engage in voluntary activities, as 77.6% of respondents did not answer to the question. Despite efforts to make it as accessible as possible, it is recognised that answering questions related to time and perceived frequency may be particularly challenging for some groups of people with functional diversity. The high number of non-responses could also suggest some lack of involvement in volunteering, as respondents are able to identify their activity as volunteers but not explicitly assess the regularity with which this occurs. Regardless the reasons that explain this pattern, that could be analysed in detail in future studies, the low response level could provide some first insights into characterization of volunteering activity in the specific area of inclusive volunteering and the fragility that surrounds it. Nevertheless, as this question is not included in the analysis model, the high non-response rate does not affect the relevance of the research results. For the few respondents who answered the question, 13.4% mentioned to volunteer weekly and 3% volunteer monthly. Sporadic participation was reported by 6% of respondents.

Table 1. Role models and position in relation to volunteering.

Question	N	%
I know volunteers with functional diversity		
No	27.0	40.3
Yes	35.0	52.2
I don't know or can't answer	5.0	7.5
Volunteer activity		
I never did volunteering	18.0	26.9
I do not do volunteering at the moment, but in the past I've done	34.0	50.7
I do volunteer work	15.0	22.4
Frequency of volunteer activities		
Weekly	9.0	13.4
Monthly	2.0	3.0
Rarely	4.0	6.0
No answer	52.0	77.6
Who suggested the volunteering		
The institution that accompanies me	12.0	17.9
Myself	26.0	38.8
Family members	5.0	7.5
Friends	8.0	11.9
Others	2.0	3.0
Have I received any offers to volunteer?		
Never	24.0	35.8
Sometimes	30.0	44.8
Often	9.0	13.4
I don't know or I don't answer	4.0	6.0
In the future I'd like to do volunteering		
Yes	49.0	73.1
No	6.0	9.0
I'm not sure about this	12.0	17.9

Source: Own elaboration.

In most cases (38.8 per cent), the initiative to volunteer came from the individual themselves, while 17.9 per cent of respondents said they had been influenced by the institution they attended, followed by suggestions from friends (11.9 per cent). Influence on family members (7.5 per cent) or other elements (3 per cent) was less common. These findings suggest that while the decision to volunteer is often a personal one, the support of institutions also makes a significant contribution. The influence of family members and friends is less common, although the important role that they typically perform on day-to-day proximity and advice. This finding could suggest that some of the underdevelopment in the field of volunteering among people with functional diversity, which may be caused by factors such as unfamiliarity to the topic, fear, or a desire to protect PwD. These results suggest that encouragement for inclusive volunteering appears to be more prevalent at the institutional than the individual level.

When asked if respondents had ever received invitations to volunteer, 58.2 per cent answered positively, with 44.8 per cent saying they had received invitations a few times and only 13.4 per cent saying they had received invitations many times. However, 35.8% of respondents said they had never received an offer to volunteer. This suggests that although some people are approached, a significant proportion of respondents have never had the opportunity, which significantly reduces the potential for activity in this type of volunteering and highlighting the need for better publicity and more direct and frequent invitations to attract new volunteers.

An analysis of future intentions to volunteer shows that 73.1% of respondents are interested in volunteering in the future, 9% do not express this intention and 17.9% of respondents are still unsure about their interest in doing so. Thus, the results attained indicate a certain predisposition towards future involvement in volunteering by people with functional diversity, despite the current comparatively low rate of volunteering activity.

In order to analyse the extent to which role models are or not able to condition current and future practice of volunteering, statistical inference tests were used, namely association or independence tests, using the chi-square test of independence and the Cramer V test. The independent variable considered was "Role models". According to the research hypothesis, two different dependent variables were considered: the current practice of volunteering, and the predisposition to get involved in volunteering in the future.

The results of the statistical tests show a statistically significant association between the presence of role modes and current practice of inclusive volunteering (χ^2 (2, N = 62) = 10,984, α = 0,004), with a considerable size-effect (Cramer V = 0,421, α = 0,004). The conditions for applying the chi-square test were met, namely the expected frequencies (Field, 2005), although the limitations of the sample size were recognised for the applications of inferential tests. Accordingly, based on the results attained, it is evident that the presence of

role models has a positive and significant impact on the behaviour of people with functional diversity. In this context, inclusive volunteering is clearly prevalent among individuals who are close with volunteering and personally know people who volunteer first-hand.

Concerning the predisposition to inclusive volunteering in the future, the same statistically significant association is found ($\chi^2 (2, N = 45) = 7.024, \alpha = 0.030$), even though the intensity of the association between the variables is more moderate (Cramer $V = 0.337, \alpha = 0.030$). The same finding is obtained by the use of the Fisher's exact test as an alternative statistical technique, which attest to the robustness of the data. Thus, the results attained confirm that the existence of role models in addition to influence the current practices of volunteering by people with functional diversity, also shape their future intentions towards volunteering. These findings highlight the powerful contributions of models in the field, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, depending on the behaviour in analysis. Indeed, it can be observed that for effective volunteering, with concrete actions and efforts developed by respondents, the effect of role models is more significant. Indeed, the results suggest that role models could have an important contribution on the concretization of individuals' intentions in effective volunteering practices.

Based on the results, the research hypothesis H1 and the corresponding research sub-hypotheses (H1a and H1b) are supported.

Table 2. Statistical tests on position in relation to volunteering according to role models.

	Chi-Square			Cramer's V		Fisher's exact test	
	Test value	Df	Sig.	Test value	Sig.	Test value	Sig.
Current Practice of inclusive volunteering	10.984	2	0.004	0.421	0.004	11.302	0.004
Predisposition to inclusive volunteering in the future	7.024	2	0.030	0.337	0.030	6.845	0.028

Source: Own elaboration.

4.2. Perceived benefits of volunteering

When analysing respondents' perceptions of the benefits of volunteering (Table 3), 86.6% of respondents highlight the fact that volunteering allows them to meet more people, 85.1% consider that volunteering helps to develop new skills and 80.6% indicate that volunteering helps to occupy their time in a positive way. A smaller percentage of respondents (47.8%) see volunteering as an opportunity to discover new job opportunities. These results show that volunteering is widely recognised for its social and personal development benefits and is an experience that respondents consider could be positive.

Table 3. The benefits of volunteering.

Question	Not at all (%)	Little (%)	A lot (%)	Don't know or can't answer (%)	Total
Volunteering allows me to socialize with more people	3.0	9.0	86.6	1.5	100
Volunteering develops skills	3.0	6.0	85.1	6.0	100
Volunteering provides work opportunities	4.5	37.3	47.8	10.4	100
Volunteering offers a better use of your time	4.5	10.4	80.6	4.5	100
Volunteering allows you to discover new interests	4.5	11.9	80.6	3.0	100
Volunteering would make me feel more confident	4.5	19.4	74.6	1.5	100
Volunteering would make me useful to the people I would be helping.	3.0	3.0	90.9	3.0	100
Volunteering would make me more respected	10.4	16.4	62.7	10.4	100
Volunteering would make me more capable	9.0	11.9	74.6	4.5	100

Source: Own elaboration.

Respondents also indicated PwFD perceive positive personal impacts associated with volunteering. with 74.6 percent of respondents saying it increased their self-confidence. 90.9 percent saying they felt more useful to other people. 74.6 percent saying they felt more capable. and 62.7 percent feeling more respected. These results suggest that volunteering makes a significant contribution to an individual's self-esteem and self-perception. reinforcing their value and sense of belonging.

Analysing the perceived benefits according to the presence of role models. the results reveal that they are considered to be independent variables, and no statistically significant association is found between them. as revealed by the chi-square test of independence with Monte Carlo correction and corroborated by the effect size measures expressed by the Cramer V test (Table 4).

This means that it is not the fact that individuals have contact with other people who volunteer that positively or negatively revisits the potential benefits associated with this field of activity. Therefore, the judgement made by PwD is apparently based on publicly available information, with no changes resulting from the internalisation of information or the social roles enacted by peers. The robustness of the results, despite the limited sample size is limited, is also confirmed by the consistency of the results when compared with those obtained using Fisher's exact test.

Therefore, based on the evidence collected the research hypothesis H2 is not supported. However, caution should be exercised when interpreting the results, given the small sample size.

Table 4 Statistical tests on perceived benefits of volunteering according to role models.

	Chi-square test			Cramer's V		Fisher's exact test	
	Test statistic	Df	Sig.	Test statistic	Sig.	Test statistic	Sig.
Volunteering allows me to socialize with more people	0.205	2	1.000	0.058	1.000	0.566	0.846
Volunteering develops skills	0.495	2	0.830	0.092	0.830	0.727	0.824
Volunteering provides work opportunities	2.323	2	0.405	0.204	0.405	2.370	0.402
Volunteering offers a better use of your time	0.794	2	0.748	0.116	0.748	0.966	0.743
Volunteering allows you to discover new interests	0.226	2	1.000	0.061	1.000	0.406	1.000
Volunteering would make me feel more confident	3.146	2	0.174	0.227	0.174	3.311	0.175
Volunteering would make me useful to the people I would be helping.	1.647	2	0.753	0.167	0.753	1.527	0.749
Volunteering would make me more respected	1.456	2	0.571	0.163	0.571	1.463	0.571
Volunteering would make me more capable	0.772	2	0.741	0.114	0.741	0.834	0.809

Source: Own elaboration.

4.3. Perceived barriers to volunteering

When analysing the barriers to volunteering from the perspective of people with functional diversity (Table 5). the main barriers perceived by respondents are lack of opportunities (59.7%), followed by lack of knowledge about the needs of people with functional diversity (56.7%), lack of accessibility (53.7%) and lack of time or resources to support people (52.2%).

Fear that other people will feel uncomfortable or that family members won't encourage volunteering are barriers cited by almost half of respondents (49.3%).

Table 5. Barriers to the practice of inclusive volunteering by individuals.

Barrier	Disagree (%)	Neither disagree nor agree (%)	Agree (%)	I Don't know or can't answer (%)	Total
There are no support staff.	26.9	19.4	41.8	11.9	100
There is neither the time nor the resources to support the people.	17.9	17.9	52.2	11.9	100
There is a lack of knowledge about the needs of a person with a disability.	23.9	11.9	56.7	7.5	100
There is no accessibility	22.4	11.9	53.7	11.9	100
People are afraid of not being able to	29.9	20.9	43.3	6.0	100
People are afraid that other people will feel uncomfortable	26.9	14.9	49.3	9.0	100
Family members do not encourage	26.9	14.9	49.3	9.0	100
Lack of opportunities	20.9	11.9	59.7	7.5	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The Chi-square test of independence with Monte Carlo correction (Table 6) also reveals that the presence of role models is independent on the way the correspondents perceive the different barriers to the practice of inclusive volunteering. The Cramer V test corroborates this position, indicating that no statistically significant association is found between the variables, for a confidence level of 5% for all the variables in analysis. If a confidence level of 10% is considered, only the perceptions about the lack of opportunities as a barrier to volunteering is moderately linked to the presence of role models (Cramer V= 0.306, α = 0.073). Comparing the results provided by a different statistical technique (the Fisher's exact test), which was used for control purposes, we observe a convergence of the results that suggests the robustness of the frequency-related findings.

Thus, for a confidence level of 5%, the research hypothesis H3 is rejected based on the results obtained. If a higher confidence interval was chosen, namely 10%, the research hypothesis could be partially accepted as one of the perceived barriers is conditioned by the presence of role models. It is important to highlight that the lack of opportunities is precisely the factor that respondents most consider to be an obstacle to volunteering.

Finding that this major barrier can be mitigated by role models set by people with functional diversity can have important practical implications for social organisations, which should encourage the development of role models among peers. This important insight is worthy of further detailed study in future research.

Table 6. Statistical tests on perceived barriers of volunteering according to role models.

	Chi-square test			Cramer's V		Fisher's exact test	
	Test statistic	Df	Test statistic	Test statistic	Sig.	Test statistic	Sig.
There are no support staff.	0.989	2	0.661	0.134	0.661	1.074	0.671
There is neither the time nor the resources to support the people.	1.212	2	0.634	0.148	0.634	1.168	0.643
There is a lack of knowledge about the needs of a person with a disability.	0.317	2	0.920	0.075	0.920	0.396	0.922
There is no accessibility	0.198	2	0.921	0.061	0.921	0.295	0.923
People are afraid of not being able to	0.064	2	1.000	0.033	1.000	0.143	1.000
People are afraid that other people will feel uncomfortable	2.273	2	0.348	0.201	0.348	2.186	0.355
Family members do not encourage	0.772	2	0.709	0.117	0.709	0.842	0.714
Lack of opportunities	5.349	2	0.073	0.306	0.073	5.277	0.060

Source: Own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

The article aims to explore a paradox in literature concerning the reduced participation in volunteering by PwFD, despite the extensive range of benefits attributed to it. In order to address this paradox, the investigation was grounded in role models and social learning theories, with a focus on the voices of individuals with functional diversity. This was achieved through the implementation of a questionnaire that was designed to be as accessible as possible.

This investigation reveals that PwFD exhibits a high propensity to engage in volunteering activities, although the current rate of participation and frequency of volunteering is low, as previously reported by other studies. Nonetheless, the practice of volunteering has been shown to engender a number of benefits. However, the benefits experienced by PwFD concerning the potential practice of volunteering primarily encompass dimensions related to socialization and skills development, rather than aspects related to employability. Consequently, the findings lend support to the proposition that volunteering provides a meaningful opportunity for social interaction and empowerment, as suggested by other studies. However, the findings emphasize the necessity for further endeavours to enhance the achievement of all the potential that inclusive volunteering is able to offer to its participants. The most significant result was found with respect to access and integration into the labour market by means of volunteering, which is currently underexploited.

The findings of the present study also indicate the recognition of a set of barriers associated with inclusive volunteering, primarily related to external factors, including a lack of accessibility, opportunities, and knowledge about the needs of PwFD. Internal factors such as fear of failure are less prominent. This finding is pivotal to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive volunteering practices, since not all types of barriers are experienced in the same way by PwFD. As observed in the study, there is a huge gap between the intention and the practice of volunteering, encompassing an intention-action paradox.

When analysing the relevance of role models in inclusive volunteering participation, the results of the study demonstrate that the behaviour of PwFD is positively and significantly influenced by peer role models. The presence of role models has been demonstrated to act as a catalyst for predisposition to volunteering and, of particular significance, for individuals' current involvement in volunteering programs. Conversely, the existence of role models is not sufficient to influence PwFD's perception of how worthwhile and challenging volunteering is. In other words, the findings suggest that interaction with peers who volunteer fosters participation among PwFD, regardless of the benefits and barriers they attribute to volunteering. This behaviour pattern may be attributed to the role these models play in the internalization of values and the development of identity. In the case of barriers, particular attention should be given to the role of role models in reducing the perception of a lack of opportunities for PwFD, as the conclusions could be influenced by the level of confidence considered in the study. The present study provides novel insights into the domain of inclusive volunteering, encompassing significant practical implications. Firstly, for organizations that support PwFD, that could make more well-informed decisions and design their intervention strategies in a more effective manner. They could also use more collaborative approaches involving family, friends and potential employers in an ongoing process of raising awareness and improving actions.

Secondly, the findings could be integrated into the design of public policies to support volunteering and create mechanisms that promote cooperation between different stakeholders to generate new volunteer opportunities, facilitate resource sharing, and build capacity in terms of human resources and infrastructure to enable the implementation of such inclusive volunteer programs. Of particular relevance, should be noted the role of public policies to support the establishing of cooperation networks for the creation and dissemination of inclusive volunteering opportunities. The research developed is of an exploratory nature and, as such, advises caution when extrapolating the results obtained to different contexts. The sample size constitutes a limitation of the article and advises caution when interpreting the results obtained.

In future research it would be worthy to exploit the position towards inclusive volunteering according to the type of disability and personal and familiar condition of the PwFD, which was not possible to carry on in this study. Another avenue of research to explore in the future will be to study the perceptions of other key stakeholders, such as institutions supporting people with disabilities and their families. Another avenue for future research is a longitudinal study that assesses how perceptions evolve over time and whether they are shaped by personal lived experiences.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest, either direct or indirect, with the editors, members of the editorial board, or members of the journal's scientific committee.

Author's contribution

Conceptualization- SB, ALM, PP, ALA; Data curation- SB, ALM; Formal analysis- SB, ALM; Funding acquisition- PP; Investigation- SB, ALM, PP, ALAA; Methodology- SB, ALM, PP, ALA; Project administration- ALM; Resources- SB, ALM, PP, ALA; Software- SB; Supervision- SB, ALM; Validation- SB, ALM; Visualization-

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Data availability

Access upon request (restricted)

The data underlying the findings of this study are restricted and are not publicly available. However, the authors will provide the data to interested readers upon request.

Statement on the Use of Generative AI:

While preparing this paper, the authors used Deepl to check spelling and grammar. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as necessary, assuming full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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