Employment Inequality for Women With Disabilities

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While employment expansions of the 1990s increased employment and income opportunities for most Americans, the nearly 10% of working-age people with disabilities did not reap the same benefits, particularly women with disabilities. In most cases, women with disabilities experience dual discrimination—first because of sex, and second because of their disability. Discrimination can be quite severe in that it affects all aspects of life, including education, employment, economic status, marriage and family relations, health care, and health and human services. Even when women with disabilities do find work, it is usually of low pay, low or no-status, and in poor working conditions.

Employment plays a very important role in the lives of persons with disabilities. Among other things, employment provides economic security and independence, gives value and status to the individual, helps with integration and acceptance of persons with disabilities, gives a sense of purpose in living, and extends social networks. Each of the benefits of employment helps to promote and enhance mental health and overall quality of life.

Since the end of World War II, women worldwide have been participating in the labor force. The increase has been most marked among married women, as well as those with children, suggesting that a woman's work life is now less likely to be interrupted by child rearing. Despite these improvements, however, women with disabilities often have with fewer employment opportunities than both women without disabilities, and men with disabilities. According to some researchers, women with disabilities are more likely to experience poor post-school
employment outcomes, consistently earn less money, have more negative employment experiences, and are routinely assigned to stereotypically “female” jobs.

The fact that finding a job is more difficult for women with disabilities than for men with disabilities can be traced to the pervasive cultural attitude that it is more important for men to have jobs and earn a living than for women. It cannot be stressed enough that this is a myth. It is equally important for women to have a job and an income of their own, as well as to support themselves and their children.

The waste of human potential that results from unemployment cannot be justified on the grounds that women with disabilities are not capable of working, or are often absent from work due to their disability. In fact, ignorance, prejudice, a reluctance to make even minor changes to support women with disabilities, and discrimination in education and training (the last of which results in persons with disabilities being less qualified than their able-bodied peers) cause high unemployment rates and limited opportunities among women with disabilities. Even when women with disabilities find work, discrimination continues through fewer promotions and advanced training opportunities.

Traditionally, research dealing with people with disabilities and employability has taken a “gender blind” approach, assuming the irrelevance and non-influence of sex. However, women with disabilities are faring far worse than their male counterparts in employment. In comparison to women with disabilities, men with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be employed, earning 44% more than their female counterparts. Women are also far less likely to be involved in vocational rehabilitation services.

To date, the needs of women with disabilities have received too little attention in education and transition research, and have been neglected as a specific priority for funding. Equal pay and opportunity for women with disabilities in employment should become a priority for transition-related education. Potential employers of women with disabilities should also be sensitized against perpetuating gender earnings gap and other discriminatory practices.

What are some of the reasons behind employment inequities for women with disabilities?

Before solutions to employment inequities can be achieved, we must be clear on the reasons why employment inequalities exist to begin with. The following is a list of contributing factors, some of which derive from research devoted to this issue:

- Secondary school experiences and training—women are less likely than men to receive occupationally specific vocational training, and women are more likely to receive training in food service employment and office occupations.
- Marriage and parenting—women with disabilities are more likely to be married than their male counterparts with the same disability. Also, motherhood may prevent many women with disabilities from working.
- Vocational rehabilitation services—women with disabilities are less involved with vocational rehabilitation services than men with disabilities.
- Vocational adjustment—women with disabilities encounter more problems in length and type (i.e., full- or part-time) of employment than men with comparable disabilities.
- Social barriers—due to the ramifications of the earnings gap, occupational stereotypes, and gender division in the labor market, women with disabilities are less likely to be employed. An employer may be reluctant to promote an employee with
disabilities because of the fear that the added responsibility or extra workload could, in some mysterious way, worsen the disability. The belief is that women with disabilities are sick, and therefore fragile.

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- Personal barriers—these involve traits and attitudes that have been reinforced since childhood in women with disabilities and may include fear of competitiveness, gender norms, limited self-esteem, low motivation for leadership, external loci of control, and learned helplessness.

Because of these factors, women with disabilities are frequently given menial and monotonous tasks, and consequently receive low wages. Women with disabilities must therefore work twice as hard as women without disabilities to gain recognition from an employer. They must first prove that they are physically able to work, and then that their disability does not hinder their competence and reliability. Only then will they be judged for the quality of the work they do.

Women with disabilities are often literally hidden from sight. Sometimes they are kept away from customers because they do not fit a stereotyped image of female beauty and will therefore downgrade the company’s image. Practices like these violate rights of equal opportunity and work potential. Moreover, it is not only employers who are unsympathetic; often fellow workers hold preconceived notions about persons with disabilities.

What can be done to help women with disabilities overcome employment inequities?

While it is recognized that problems exist regarding women with disabilities, the next and most important step is to identify solutions to this existing problem. Some of these barriers can be overcome through preparation and adaptation. Below is a list of solutions geared to assist women with disabilities in overcoming employment inequality:

- Design, evaluate, and implement strategies at the high school level, if not before.
- Increase the participation and success rate of women with disabilities in competitive employment and training programs.
- Create gender-blind and gender-fair courses, career counseling strategies, and work experiences comparable to those of men with respect to wages, hours, and type of work.
- Eliminate occupational segregation by gender and inequitable service provision in the vocational rehabilitation system, as well as other employment service agencies.
- Highlight success stories of women with disabilities since successful employment experiences for women with disabilities have been directly correlated to high levels of motivation.
- Do further research on differences and similarities of employment outcomes for women with and without disabilities.
- Increase visibility and positive representation by the media of women with disabilities in order to provide women with images to identify with and aspire to, as well as to validate their efforts.
- Prepare their employees before the new employees with disabilities begin work. This would help to reduce prejudice and ensure that employees with and without disabilities feel comfortable and can interact freely with one another.

Women with disabilities must be afforded the same rights and opportunities as all other persons, irrespective of disability status and sex, with regard to employment. This is especially critical because employment impacts individuals on so many levels, both internally and externally. Women with disabilities have the potential to achieve high goals if given the opportunity. No longer should society ignore their presence and capabilities. Women with disabilities demand to be seen, recognized and valued for their abilities, and are increasingly demanding full participation and equality in the workplace.