

Disablement and Feminisation of Poverty

By Maria Barile

From the economic viewpoint, one can infer that poverty and disablement are synonymous with each other. What happens when poverty and disability are experienced at the same time? This article will look into the economic and social experiences of women with disability based on the Canadian experience.

According to 1991 statistics, women with disabilities between the ages 15-64 comprise 13 percent or 1,182,145 of the Canadian population. This figure is higher than the total population in the province of Manitoba at 1,091,942. Yet, the political attention given to this segment of the population is less than that paid to any other group in the country.

... Unemployment rate, among women with disabilities was 16 percent compared to 13.2 percent of men with disabilities and 9.9 percent for non-disabled women;

... Poverty among women with disabilities was 25.1 percent compared to 18 percent for men with disabilities and 21 percent for non-disabled women;

... Employment rate for women with disabilities was 48.4 percent compared to 64.2 percent for men with disabilities

... 65 percent of women with disabilities who worked 30 or more hours a week earned annual incomes of under CA\$25,000 or US\$16,198 (Fawcette 1996*).

In a 1999 research project, conducted by

Shirley Masuda for the Disabled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada, women with different types of disabilities, from each of the 10 provinces and territories shared stories of how cutbacks in transfer payments to their areas have affected their lives.

There were cutbacks given in at least three crucial areas: monthly payments from various welfare agencies, personal/home care services and job training possibilities.



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According to the report, 60 percent of women with all types of disabilities have relied on the welfare system either full-time or part-time. This underscores the systemic experience of poverty and fear lived by women with disabilities.

Bias Versus Women With Disabilities

The question of who determines what or for whom varies from group to group, but is always based on the "balance or imbalance of power." Within the women's movement, the 'personal is political' has been a fundamental premise and has served as the basis for the emergence of other feminist views.

From the standpoint of women with disabilities, politics is an intruder in their personal lives. Masuda's study shows that women with disabilities from British Columbia, New Foundland and the territories share similar consequences from the same government action. The problem is not suffered on an individual scale.

It is policies that are based on bottom line "profit-making economies" that establish guidelines for services such as home care. These guidelines have very personal outcomes for women with disabilities. They dictate, for instance, how many hours of personal attendant services she gets, which in turn determines how often she gets a bath and what time she gets up in the morning or goes to bed at night.

These policies also affect one's choice of home or whether one can depend on welfare or one must work.

This is a form of social oppression that stems from systemic problems rooted in the present social and political system.

The 1999 Doe and Kimpson study on dis-

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ability and old age pension reveals that the current system perpetuates income inequity for all women at different levels:

- ▶ Women who become disabled receive less disability pensions than men;
- ▶ Part-time work for those on disability pensions is more limited for women than men;
- ▶ Women receive less retirement pensions than men

Women with disabilities do not just deal with lower incomes but other aspects of "social poverty." They incur more expenses which are linked to impairments (e.g. dialyses, hearing aid batteries) and an environment that is not disabled-friendly. For instance, public transportation is generally inaccessible. In Montreal, some private adapted taxi requires a minimum of CA\$10.00 (US\$ 6.47) fare, compared to a non-accessible taxi that normally costs from CA\$4 to \$8 (US\$2.5 to \$5.18).

Marginalised Than Most

Low-income women are often advised that money management is the key to handling their finances. They are advised to use coupons or check bargaining. But such options are not open to women with disabilities since they are not available in multiplier formats. Discount announcements are made in the print media or via the

Internet, which are useless to the eye-impaired, or on radio and television, which are not helpful to the hearing-impaired.

For women with various mobility impairments, the shopping area, especially the smaller stores in the neighborhood, are not accessible. They normally don't provide assistance to people with disabilities.

What this means is that women with disabilities who earn less are forced to spend more. They are also less likely to invest in private funds or set up their own business. What is alarming is that they find themselves in greater poverty as they grow older.

Roots of Inequity

Most disabled women's organisations in Canada have no core funding.

Women with disabilities make up between 13 to 16 percent of the women's population in Quebec and more than half of disabled population in age 30 + in Quebec. Yet, Action des Femmes Handicapée de Montreal (AFHM), an organisation dedicated to women with disabilities in Montreal, receives less than one percent of the budget allocated to advocacy groups by Office des Personne Handicapées du Quebec. As a result, AFHM has only been able to provide limited services and has had to rely on volunteers to fulfill its mission.

A historical review of the social construction of roles ascribed to women with disabilities show that they have not only been treated differently but also unequally.

From the period of industrialisation to the age of technology, accessibility has not included social systems. This has resulted in a disabling environment and the "disintegration" of persons

with impairments from society.

Persons with disabilities experience social and economic tension in the disabling environment, among them the relationship between space and mobility. This is compounded by inequality in relationships. Discrimination as experienced by persons with disabilities consists of paternalism, neglect, and exclusion. Historically, the primary groups that had a determining power in the lives of women and men with disabilities have been members of medical and religious groups. Through a process of paternalistic control, social norms and myths, these create an acceptable ideology, and a body of knowledge



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that defines physical ability. Patriarchy is the root of sexism. Thus, the ideology that oppresses women with disabilities is rooted in both sexist and paternalistic values.

Cycle of Exclusion

The exclusion of women with disabilities occurs at different levels—the planning process, lack of funds for accommodations, their absence in the women’s agenda, and omissions in research, action, policy and services designed to assist women in overcoming discrimination.

In the last 30 years, women with disabilities have written about these exclusions in the academic as well as community-based media.

In their 1988 report, Fine and Asch stated that some feminist organisations had refused to study women with disabilities since it reinforced traditional stereotypes of dependent, passive women.

The other reality is that most women’s organisations are experiencing cutbacks and are dictated by what Joan Meister, former chair of the DAWN calls the “funding-driven agenda.” Groups must spend money according to someone else’s agenda, usually a political agenda.

But these exclusions contribute to the inequality of women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities also find themselves in the sexist and paternalistic nucleus.

A study conducted by Masuda in 1995 linked attempted suicide by disabled women to issues of economic and social poverty. The study showed that there were internal (impairment-related) as well as external (social) factors behind these attempted suicides. However, social factors like violence, poverty, discrimination, stereotypes and the belief that the disabled are “better off dead,” were cited as the primary reasons for attempted suicide.

The study showed how three pivotal issues—sexism, paternalism based on biological determinism, and use of power by those outside of the disabled women’s community—come together and further oppress women with disabilities.

Recognising Diversity

During the second wave of feminism the notion of diversity emerged and the idea of a singleton “women’s” movement was questioned. Women with disabilities were not the first to question their exclusion. Black, lesbian and proletarian feminists helped to shape a newer vision of the women’s movement. Women with disabilities began to build “an adapted room of our own” during the latter part of this second wave.

If we look at the various suggestions on how to end the feminisation of poverty, they operate on the main thesis that the core problems stem historically from a capitalist patriarchal system. This is a system that keeps women as a reserved army of labour or in lower-paid positions both in the public and private spheres. Thus it follows that to eradicate poverty one must work toward changing the core structure.

But for women with disabilities, there are few additional barriers.

In Canada, members of equality-seeking groups (of which disabled women are active) have fought passionately to ensure that social programmes that address poverty are implemented and sustained. They lost ground in 1995.

All analysis of previous and upcoming trade agreements have omitted disability issues. How will trade affect disability businesses and programmes? How will the sexist practice of distributing equipment and prioritising employment to men over women with disabilities be dealt with, especially in poorer countries?

Women and men with disabilities were not invited to the People's Summit that was organised parallel to the Presidents' and Ministers' Summit. This exclusion will only perpetuate economic and social poverty not only for Canadian women with disabilities but for women with disabilities everywhere.

Feminism and Disablement

To eradicate poverty and violence all women must identify the process and continuum under which the movements can reconstruct themselves. Some women with disabilities have begun the process of reconstructing a "proud identity" by identifying and reclaiming elements of their oppression, without rejecting any parts of who they are.

In the present social structure, the more layers of differences one has from those who determine norms the further away one is positioned from the measured social power.

This accounts for the exclusion of women with disabilities from mainstream feminist organisations, and the sense of powerlessness ex-

pressed by disabled women therein.

One must view disabled women's position(s) in multiplier ways. There is a need to formulate a feminist interpretation of disability and it should be one that recognises that:

- ▶ women with disabilities are women with specific realities;
- ▶ disability is experienced differently by women than men;
- ▶ the number of women that acquire impairments after age 15 increases;
- ▶ impairment lived by women may be the consequence of sexism and violence in their environment;
- ▶ recognises the interaction between the political world, and the private sphere;
- ▶ recognises the notion of impairment (biology) and ascertains the power that it has in determining personal and political destiny, and
- ▶ Identifies the imbalance of gender and non-disabled power that maintains hegemonic social structures.

Women with disabilities, along with other minority women must be included in all aspects of feminist thinking. This strengthens the feminist collective and ensures "enabling justice" that will bring an end to poverty and violence. ♪

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