

Women, Education and Disability Research Project

The Effects of Post-Secondary Education on the Lives of Women with Physical Disabilities

by Kelly Scott

L'auteure présente les résultats d'une étude qui avait pour but de déterminer si l'éducation post-secondaire augmente les chances des femmes handicapées de se trouver un emploi. L'étude conclut que l'éducation post-secondaire a des effets positifs sur l'estime de soi et la sensibilisation personnelle mais on a relevé aucune différence appréciable quant aux chances qu'ont les femmes handicapées de se trouver un emploi à plein temps.

The Women, Education and Disability Research Project involved gathering information about experiences of women with physical disabilities living in the province of Manitoba with post-secondary education. Supported by the Secretary of State Women's Program, its purpose was to determine how post-secondary training contributes to increased opportunities for women with physical disabilities. The research revealed that post-secondary education had positive effects on the women's awareness of societal issues and their feelings about self. However, their success in finding employment was no higher than women with physical disabilities who had not had post-secondary education. This underscores the need for continued efforts to tackle attitudinal, architectural, and systemic barriers in the post-secondary and employment settings. Greater efforts are also needed to provide a wider range of educational choices, inclusive of professional and traditionally male-oriented fields of training, in order to increase opportunities for employment and resist further marginalization of women with disabilities.

Introduction to the study

Implications of being female and having a disability in our society are many. Despite some changes in the social and economic lives of women, with and without disabilities, both groups remain in a secondary economic status in our country. Many authorities claim that education is a central way in which oppressed groups, such as women with disabilities, may improve their situation.

The Women, Education and Disability Research Project examined women's experiences with post-secondary education and their subsequent involvement in the labour market, their income levels, and the effects on their personal lives. The range of formal and informal supports or services used and the different experiences for women with visible and invisible disabilities were also explored.

The 46 women interviewed for this project met two criteria: (1) they were women with primary disabilities which affect physical

functioning, specifically in terms of levels of mobility and agility; (2) they had completed a post-secondary education or training program—namely, they had obtained certification, diplomas or degrees from a recognized university institution, college program or technical-vocational training centre. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 54 years and resided in Manitoba. Each woman was interviewed in person.

Effects of disability

The primary disabilities experienced by participants in this project included arthritis, cerebral palsy, chronic back pain, fibromyalgia, lupus, paraplegia, amputee, polio/post-polio, scoliosis, spina bifida, multiple sclerosis, and other mobility-agility related disabilities. Most of the women had difficulty walking long distances (80.4 per cent), using stairs (89.1 per cent), and writing (50 per cent) or standing for extended periods of time (78.3 per cent). These are all activities which are frequently engaged in as students or workers. Many also commented on architectural barriers such as stairs, and the absence of or long distances between elevators which they experienced in the educational setting. The availability of equipment and services was very important to these women, and highlighted the notion that the way in which our society is structured intrinsically creates limitations for many people.

Education

Over half of the women interviewed had completed post-secondary studies at one of the three major institutions in the province of Manitoba. Thirteen women (28.3 per cent) attended the University of Manitoba, ten women completed degrees at the University of Winnipeg (21.7 per cent), six attended Red River Community College (13.0 per cent) and the remaining seventeen had completed programs at private colleges or training institutions and hospital nursing programs.

Services or equipment used during post-secondary program

The women were asked to rank in order of importance the services and equipment used during their program. Elevator service was the highest priority and was used by 26 or 56.5 per cent of the women. Funding for education costs from sources such as Canada Employment Centre and Vocational Rehabilita-

tion for Disabled Persons sponsorship, as well as student loans and bursaries was used by 25 women. Special transportation such as "Handi-Transit" was the third most commonly used service identified by 19 women (41.3 per cent).

Funding support to cover educational costs was particularly important to the women. However, the recent federal and provincial government policies will likely continue to have negative influences on the availability of funds for service and employment programs which help consumers re-enter the labour force.

The women also felt that modified examinations or tests, such as extended time to complete examinations or use of equipment to document answers was a high priority. Special transportation services and parking accommodations are also very important. There is a clear need for continued efforts to provide accommodations for people with disabilities in the post-secondary setting. In spite of the challenges faced by educational institutions and service programs in periods of economic restraint, it is crucial that progressive measures which have led to the development of services for people with disabilities be preserved and advanced in the years to come.

Formal and informal supports

The women were also asked to what extent various individuals or groups provided support to them during their period of educational training. Support was received—in order of importance—from immediate family, professors, other students, Disability Services, and Vocational Rehabilitation Counsellors. Higher levels of support were received from informal sources such as family and friends than from formal agencies or service providers.

Barriers in the post-secondary setting

Participants were asked to describe barriers, if any, they had encountered in the post-secondary facility. Common themes were as follows:

Attitudinal barriers: Others' preconceived notions regarding disabilities were barriers to full participation in the post-secondary setting. As one woman said, "...disability is something that occurs

more because of others attitudes than because of the disease which requires me to use a wheelchair." For example, instructors' attitudes led to a number of women being discouraged from enrolling in specific courses or fields of study. Suggestions were given without any consideration of the student's academic record or interest in the course, and seemed to be based solely on the appearance of "disability." Others were singled out by instructors who explained class material in great detail, associating physical disability with intellectual incapacity.

Architectural Barriers: In spite of recent efforts directed at modifying buildings in order to provide sufficient access to individuals with disabilities, a majority of women in this project were confronted with inaccessible buildings or classrooms during their studies. Common barriers included stairs leading up to educational buildings or immediately faced upon entry to buildings, absence of handrails, poorly constructed ramps, absence of or limited access to elevator service, lack of accessible parking, and inaccessible wash-room facilities.

Other Systemic Barriers: Several women had difficulty in gaining access to particular programs because of the lack of flexibility in the structure of the program. For instance, some faculty programs require students to assume five full courses in the regular academic year. This requirement essentially excludes many women with physical disabilities because of its impact on levels of pain and fatigue.

Post-secondary education and its effects on personal lives

Women in this project were asked to describe ways in which post-secondary training had influenced their lives, if at all, in terms of personal beliefs or values, feelings about oneself, employment, and involvement in the community.

Education provided an opportunity to become familiar with global issues, to develop and enhance critical-thinking skills, and to challenge the status-quo. Enhanced self-esteem and personal awareness was also a predominant theme. For many, further education and accompanying opportunities to foster creativity and learning led to increased levels of confidence and independence.

Close to 70 per cent of the women saw further education as a positive factor in influencing their qualifications for higher level jobs and opportunities for participation in the labour market. As well, post-secondary education was perceived as influential in women's increased involvement in the community. They expressed an increased commitment to volunteering their expertise and skills through membership roles on various boards, committees, and organizations advocating policy change to improve the situation for people with disabilities.

Employment

One of the principal consequences of post-secondary education explored in this project was employment. Prior to attending a post-secondary program, 24 of the women interviewed (52.2 per cent) reported employment. An identical number of women, 24, reported current employment. The rates of unemployment experienced by participants in this study were much higher than the averages of Canadian women with similar levels of education. Employment or unemployment *per se* was not influenced by attainment of further education. Reasons for this include difficulties experienced in accessing employment including the persistence of barriers, inadequate affirmative action legislation, and the poor economic environment.

However, a small number of women were now using their skills and educational qualifications in self-employment endeavours. In addition, the rate of permanent part-time employment had more than doubled following post-secondary education. Several of the women who were employed also described increased opportunities for higher paying positions corresponding to their enhanced academic qualifications. Over half of the employed project participants were currently working in professional jobs requiring higher levels of education, and offering more favourable monetary benefits than lower level positions.

Further analysis was also completed to determine if the visibility of the disability contributed to the women's success rates in obtaining higher paying positions. The results indicated that in situations of both part-time and full-time employment,

women in this study with visible disabilities earned substantially higher levels of income than women with invisible disabilities.

Summary of the findings

Information gathered during these interviews substantiated initial research assumptions that post-secondary training was influential on various aspects of an individual's life, leading to increased self-esteem and greater awareness and involvement in the society at large. However, employment and economic gains due to education were less conclusive. Women with visible disabilities attained higher level professional jobs and increased job security ("permanent" employment) than women with invisible disabilities in this study. These findings underscore the need for future efforts directed at exploring the different experiences of women with visible and invisible physical disabilities and for continued efforts to break down existent barriers in educational and employment settings. Enhanced efforts to promote a wider range of educational choices—which include professional and traditionally male-oriented fields of training—are also recommended to advance opportunities for gainful employment for this group. If indications of limited employment and economic gains due to post-secondary education are borne out by further research, it will further highlight the need for aggressive efforts to resist repeated injustices and experiences of employment inequity for women with disabilities in our society.

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References

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- Statistics Canada. *The Health and Activity Limitation Survey*. Ottawa, June, 1988.

FACTS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT AND WOMEN WITH A DISABILITY

What's the likelihood of having a job in Canada if you have a disability?

Not very good.

- Only 40.3 per cent of all working age people with disabilities have jobs, compared with 69.9 per cent of people who do not have disabilities. (HALS, 1986).*
- Only 30.7 per cent of women with disabilities have jobs.
- 540,000 of 879,000 working-age women with disabilities are outside the Canadian labour force.

What about if you are a woman who has been labelled "mentally handicapped"?

The situation is even more discouraging.

- Only 27.1 per cent have jobs. Well over half (61.3 per cent) of those who have jobs are in sheltered work settings.

What are the barriers to employment?

A range of factors that support successful participation in the labour market are either not in place, are operating in a restrictive way, or are not being effectively coordinated.

What are some of the factors contributing to successful employment?

Good education, access to quality training, use of private or community transportation, adequate and portable personal support services, aids and devices, accommodations for disability in the workplace, non-discriminatory employment practices, efficient human rights mechanisms, vigorous employment equity measures, access to adequate wages, job security, informed vocational counsellors, and good, flexible disability benefit programs are all crucial factors.

Where these are in place and available in a coordinated, non-restrictive way, people with disabilities are more likely to have jobs, regardless of the severity of their disability.

Which of these success factors are in place for working age women with disabilities?

For many women with disabilities, the success factors either aren't in place, can't be accessed, or operate at cross purposes.

- Only 42 per cent of working age women with disabilities have completed high school or have a higher level of education.
- People with disabilities account for as few as 2 per cent of all trainees under some major public job training systems.
- Only 9.1 per cent of women with disabilities who are employed are in workplaces with employment equity programs and haven't been segregated in sheltered work in the process.
- Only 6.1 per cent of those who are employed have had job accommodations made for their disability.
- Only 31.7 per cent of women with disabilities who need personal support with daily living activities have all the support they require.
- 24.5 per cent needing aids or devices for mobility, hearing or seeing need more than they are receiving.
- 46.8 per cent are in situations where community transportation services don't exist or are inaccessible.
- The people most likely to have the costs relating to their disability fully covered are those who remain outside the labour market.

What can be done?

A new approach to public policy and programs in this area is needed—one that is comprehensive, determined, systematic, and long term. All the pieces of the solution need to be in place and more intelligently coordinated. New forms of collaboration for success across government departments and the private and voluntary sectors must be found.

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* Statistical data are from Statistics Canada's 1986 *Health and Activity Limitation (Adult Household) Survey (HALS)* data set.