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Abstract

This article looks at the double jeopardy of being a woman and having a disability, which presents a double challenge to such women who are at risk of being isolated and marginalised. The three women who co-wrote this article with Peggy Hutchison (professor at Brock University, Ontario) have experienced significant barriers in four major areas of their lives - poverty, health, safety and control over one's life. **Keyword: Women**

Double Jeopardy: Women with disabilities speak out about community and relationships

The views of four women: three women who have been labelled and one who is a friend

by Peggy Hutchison with Linda Beechey, Claudette Foerster and Barb Fowke

There is a double jeopardy involved in being a woman and having a disability. Women with disabilities experience all the barriers that women in our society normally experience; in addition, they endure the problems that people with disabilities face in their daily lives. Confronted with both sets of barriers, these women face a double challenge compared to many ordinary citizens: they are more at risk of being isolated and marginalised than if they were only women or only persons with a disability.

The three labelled women who co-wrote this article have experienced significant barriers in four major areas of their lives.

POVERTY

Women in our society are more susceptible to poverty than men, particularly as they get older. Most people with disabilities in Canada also experience borderline poverty conditions. Linda, Claudette and Barb live at the poverty line. This affects all aspects of their lives, including educational and leisure opportunities, housing, nutrition and health.

Many women live on low fixed incomes because pensions are their only or main source of income. The three women feel that low pensions contribute to the poverty of women experiencing the double jeopardy.

A pension provides enough money to pay rent, bills and food and transportation. Depending on the month, you might have around \$100 left for leisure, travel or holidays. That is enough money to do some small things, but nothing big.

Equally important to the low pensions is the situation most women with disabilities find themselves in regarding employment. They live in poverty due to underemployment - working in jobs that offer little challenge and low pay. This predicament is often shared by non-disabled women in our society.

I don't have a job because a disability makes it harder for me to find or keep a job. I have had a few jobs in the past, but they paid low wages. In the sheltered workshop, I only got paid 30 cents an hour and when I worked at Mac's Milk I got minimum wage. I don't know why I left that job. I was under a program and they sent me back to the workshop. They do that to a lot of people. Just when you think you have a community job, they send you back, so this forces me to rely on a disability pension.

The co-authors feel that women with disabilities are more susceptible to financial abuse than other people. They feel this is a particularly important issue for women who are trying to live more independently in the community.

I am a good saver, but sometimes friends or family take advantage of me. They take my money, or they move in and let me pay the rent. When that happens, I don't have enough money. If I want to do things in the community, I have to be more careful of my money. Sometimes guys who don't have the money and aren't responsible try to take advantage of the little bit of money I do have. So I have to be very careful.

Social stereotypes and assumptions about men taking care of women also affect the lives of women with disabilities. If a woman decides to live with someone, her source of income is threatened. This is also an ongoing concern for ordinary women, contributing to their poverty as well.

If you are a woman who is living with a man, then society assumes that the man will pay your way. Therefore, they take a good chunk of your pension away. Not only that, they told us if we live together for more than three years, I will lose my pension altogether.

The poverty that women with disabilities experience often forces them to live in less than ideal housing. In addition, many women are severely restricted in their leisure pursuits and access to community resources because of a lack of money. This life of poverty, which is perpetuated by the welfare system and human services, leaves women with disabilities further handicapped and alienated from their communities.

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Many women with disabilities find themselves susceptible to a range of health problems. Some of these may be the direct result of actual disabilities. However, the women contributing their experiences feel that, for the most part, their health problems are related to other issues. These issues, such as poor nutrition, are directly related to their poverty. Because of society's low expectation of these women, due to their disabilities, many women are denied opportunities to learn about important health-related issues.

When I had some women's problems, the doctor just told me it was because I have a handicap. They tend to think you can't really understand what's wrong with you. So it's very important for us to bug them to get enough information about our problems - not just give us a prescription. They need to really explain things about the problem so we

can understand what is wrong with us. It would help if I had some other women to discuss these problems I have with. But unfortunately if you don't know very many other women, then you're stuck.

Like everyone, a person who is experiencing health problems, particularly prolonged ones, will have difficulties enjoying a high quality of life in the community.

Some of my health problems go on and on. I was taking too many different kinds of pills and didn't realise that problem. My other health problem is going on and on and I don't know when it is going to end. I can't go out as much, I worry about it, and I have to rely on other people to help me out.

Many barriers caused by women's health problems have not been given adequate attention in terms of how they affect women with disabilities. For example, understanding the relationship between poor nutrition and premenstrual syndrome could be important for many women with disabilities. In addition, supporting women with disabilities to be good consumers with a medical profession that generally patronises women could also help disabled women's health and well-being.

SAFETY

Women with disabilities experience the same problem that all other women in society face: fear due to violence against women. Women with disabilities are even more vulnerable and isolated because of their physical limitations, lack of experience and isolation.

I worry that some guy might try to force me into a car or some place and rape me. I go through in my mind what could happen and I try to think of ways to get out of the mess. Someone has tried it - I know. I identified him to the police.

The women co-writing this article have experienced physical and sexual harassment, and sexual control by men such as landlords, boyfriends and bosses. They have also experienced abuse as a direct result of homelessness, and rape. As a result, they feel that their lives are significantly restricted.

When we are looking for a place to live, it has to be cheap. But often the cheap places aren't very safe. And going out at night downtown is dangerous. So I don't go out at night very much anymore.

When women, including those with disabilities, worry about their safety, they live their lives on the defensive. They try to find places to live where there is less risk. They are careful about where they go, when and with whom, and they begin to mistrust people, especially men. This may protect them from those who may cause them harm, but it also limits their opportunities for good relationships with a range of people. Being forced to live this way undermines efforts to strengthen people's social networks and build stronger, more responsive and cooperative communities.

CONTROL OVER OUR LIVES

Women with disabilities well understand the dilemma of needing a safe, secure community to live in while maintaining control and dignity in their lives. One woman told a story of trying to gain control over her life.

Both my parents and worker are somewhat over protective. For a long time, my mother wanted to make decisions for me, to keep me living at home, and take care of me. But no more. I can live on my own and make my own decisions. I think if I were a guy this wouldn't happen so much but because I'm a girl, she feels I need to be protected.

My parents would feel more comfortable if I were living in a group home where it is safe. But I say, where is it safe these days for a woman? No where! In fact, when I was still living in a group home I was raped - not there, but when I was walking downtown. A guy asked me for coffee and that was that. No one believed me. I went to the hospital by myself. I got blamed for it. But now they believe me after seeing me upset for so many years.

People labelled handicapped are beginning to gain rights and have input into decisions affecting their lives. But women with disabilities continue to be disadvantaged. As women in this society, they are reinforced for being passive, well behaved and allowing men to make decisions for them. As persons with disabilities, they are reinforced for accepting their inferior position in society. Women with disabilities who are independent, assertive, angry or feminist are seen as having mental health problems or being misled by irrational consumer leaders or advocates. It is only when women with disabilities become more empowered that they will develop more positive self-images, confidence and a sense of control over their lives.

FRIENDSHIP AND INTIMACY

Many women with disabilities have limited social networks due to weak ties with family, friends and lovers. Relationships with family can be nonexistent, strained or fraught with over protection, as was discussed earlier. It is also difficult for women with disabilities to meet ordinary people in the community who are potential friends. This is largely due to the segregation they often experience in their housing, education, work or recreation situations.

When I got back to the workshop, I felt frustrated and bored and rejected. I wasn't making that much when I was working at a restaurant, but I'm making even less now. I liked working in the community because I had more freedom. I got acquainted with lots of good, kind people. On Saturdays I still drop by for lunch to see some of them.

Finding and developing good relationships with men has been a problem for many women. Sometimes the woman's naivety, due to lack of experience, has made it difficult for the women to know how to behave in relationships. Two of the co-writers simply feel men do not like women with disabilities.

Some men get greedy and some men don't feel comfortable being with a woman who has a disability. I think this is because they are selfish. I've had relationships where I thought they liked me, but then they took advantage of me and eventually left. Others, when they find out about my handicap, they don't want any part of it.

Often when I am with men they argue a lot; I feel unwanted with most of the men in my life. Sometimes I think men like money better than women.

Sometimes parents and workers try to restrict women with disabilities from having intimate relationships with men. They do this by, for example, imposing arbitrary rules or denying opportunities for privacy in the woman's home. The women also feel that they did not have adequate opportunities to learn about their sexuality in a natural way as they grew up, due to over protection.

Being connected to other women is seen as particularly difficult for women with disabilities. The co-writers feel that they have very few opportunities to connect with other women for support and companionship.

A lot of times, I prefer to have women friends to talk to. But it's hard to meet women who could become friends. We don't know many people. We don't know where to meet people.

It is not easy to get help with relationships, either in developing them or in resolving difficulties, with female or male friends.

When we have problems with friends or boyfriends, there's not much help to learn how to sort through things. I had to figure it out myself. Counselling is about the only thing that is available.

Most women with disabilities have not had the benefit of becoming connected to a larger women's movement for support. They feel this is because their disability has been seen as the most important thing about them. Instead, they have gained their support largely from People First, a self-advocacy movement. But they also feel that they need to be part of the women's movement. It would be a vehicle for making friends and for gaining support around many issues creating their double jeopardy.

Women with disabilities experience significant barriers in all areas of their lives. Fortunately, more of them are uniting in an attempt to understand the barriers and are beginning to advocate for change. Disability groups are beginning to address women's issues. Organisations specifically targeting women and disability issues, such as the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN), are also becoming active across the country. Finally, it is hoped that these groups will begin to make a significant dent in the women's movement

itself. They can encourage it to address all women's issues, including those of women who have disabilities.

The hope is that women with disabilities will live fuller lives in their communities. They need to be valued as women and recognised for their capacities instead of their disabilities. They need to be able to participate in safe and welcoming communities. Finally, they need a strong network of relationships that can provide opportunities for participation, support, friendship and intimacy.

Peggy Hutchison is a professor at Brock University, Ontario, in Recreation and Leisure Studies and an advisor for Kitchener-Waterloo People First, a self-help group for people labelled mentally handicapped. Linda Beechy is President of People first; Barb Fowke is Vice President and Claudette Foerster is Secretary.