

DISABILITY

A Gendered Perspective

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One of the main achievements of the disability movement has been to challenge the way that disability is understood by developing the social model of disability. This model came into existence as a challenge to the dominant medical model of disability that understands the 'problem' of disability to be the impairment of the disabled person, and the solution to the problem of disability as care, cure and charity. The social model of disability understands people to be disabled by attitudes and barriers in our social environment, and the solution to this problem is focussed on recognising this discrimination and the role that society plays in disabling its citizens, and removing barriers and securing support for disabled people to participate as equal citizens. This opposing understanding of what disability means, and the assertion that how we view and consequently discriminate against people with disabilities **is** the disability, corresponds to feminist arguments against the idea that men are biologically different and therefore superior to women. It is argued that women do less well in our society not because they are by biological definition inferior to men, but because we live in a sexist society that attributes gender roles to women and men and then discriminates against women because of the perceived differences these roles necessitate and the lesser value given to the roles and responsibilities consequently undertaken by women. Discrimination based upon disability and sexism is reliant on difference and using perceived differences between women and men and disabled and non-disabled people as justification for discrimination. The systemic nature of the discrimination against women and people with disabilities masks the subjectivity of our understanding of gender and disability, and has become a process that both creates and maintains inequalities whilst obscuring the assumptions that are the basis for the inequality. Both types of discrimination also rely on society understanding the supposed differences between the sexes and non-disabled and disabled people as more important than the multitude of factors that show similarity. Consequently one of the main ways that both equalities strands seek to oppose discrimination is to challenge the assumptions of difference and inferiority to which female and disabled identity has become tied, and in doing so challenge the systemic discrimination faced by both groups.

Discrimination for people with disabilities and women does not only manifest itself in unfounded negative assumptions about ability, both groups face a kind of invisibility in society; however this invisibility is articulated in different ways. Although it is arguable that things have improved latterly, disabled people are frequently literally invisible in our society. There is almost what could be considered a parallel society for people with disabilities with different schools, play facilities, languages, buses, toilets, health services, not to mention the multitudes of public spaces that can't be accessed by people with mobility difficulties for example. This parallel system reflects the different expectations that as a society we have for disabled people, culminating in the fact that our society does not really expect people with disabilities to move from education into the workforce. Women as a group are clearly not absent from our society but the extent that sexist discrimination oppresses women is often so insidious as to be invisible; witnessing racist remarks from a TV host to a guest on a chat show would stand out, watching a TV host make sexist remarks to a female guest would not. Women also face an aspect of invisibility linked to diminished expectation when one considers the areas of work that women are often absent from. We see nothing unusual in the fact that most oil rigs are staffed only by men for example, or that the majority of fire, police and army personnel are male because we do not expect women to work in these areas. It is the anomaly of their absence that is invisible, not the women themselves. Mainstreaming in terms of health services, schools and accessibility to public spaces has begun to challenge and redress the invisibility of people with disabilities in our society, but the fact that women have been 'mainstreamed' all along and yet still face discrimination shows that this system is not able to fully address the roots of the discrimination that make such action necessary.

The limitations of mainstreaming highlight the importance of challenging sexism and disablism by making these groups more visible and more represented in leadership roles. Although there is obviously need for more baseline work around getting women and disabled people into more varied work roles, getting people from both groups into positions of power creates a public challenge to the

dominant discriminatory stereotypes and expectations about the assumed limitations of both groups. The disability equality movement can learn much from the experiences of the women's sector in trying to address and redress inequalities in the labour market, that have made clear that the quality as well as the quantity of work is a key factor in how successful this kind of challenge really is in fighting discrimination. Although women are numerically more represented in the labour market there is an over representation of women in low paid, low security jobs centred around the four Cs. Disabled groups need to engage with the women's sector to understand how to avoid the job market ghettoisation that has happened for many women.

Our economic system and our values mirror one another so people who face discrimination are devalued in monetary terms, both in their ability to earn money and in their access to services that are paid for from tax revenues because they are seen as a 'cost' or a 'burden' to the system. Presently disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-disabled people, and white families that include a disabled person have a 36% risk of child poverty, rising to 83% if the family is Bangladeshi in origin. So in the same way that women are financially penalised by an economic system set up to support the needs of men, disabled people are financially penalised by a system that is set up to support the needs of non-disabled people and that does not acknowledge them as an asset. Without a change in both attitudes and the economic expression of those attitudes discrimination will persist for both groups.

The poverty associated with disability relates to sexism because of how caring and the cost of caring is divided between the sexes in our society. Lots of disabled people are turned away by social services when they approach them for help, forcing them to rely on family and friends until they reach crisis point. As women are more likely to provide unpaid care to family and friends and are more likely to be a single parent to a disabled child this poverty has a gendered bias that discriminates against women. This system discriminates against both disabled people and their carers by denying both groups independence, autonomy and equal access to the labour market, opportunities to undertake paid work and the refusal to value 'non economic' contributions

to society. Currently economic activity (i.e. working and spending your earnings) is valued more than activities that support the social reproductive and caring economy. We are told that social reproductive activities are valued but not to the extent that money is given over to them, and the increased risk of poverty if you are disabled or if you are a women is testament to this. Understanding the economics of discrimination and how discrimination translates into financial disparity for disabled people and for women crosses over the work of both equality strands and raises many of the same questions about how discrimination works and is maintained by our social structures.

Understanding how to value the diversity of people in our society and their various contributions and how to measure this meaningfully is fundamental to moving away from a system that discriminates through economics. Part of this shift is about understanding that although people don't make equal contributions to society in terms of money (and couldn't in a capitalist economy), a society that values everyone understands that our contributions extend beyond what can be counted in pounds. Before we had a capitalist system based on money women and disabled people had a value that was understood in the societies where they lived, and it is this value that we are seeking to make visible, not the value that reverts to money and therefore capitalism and therefore patriarchy. You can't continue to put an economic cost on humanity if you want to get rid of systemic discrimination against certain groups. It can't matter that it is economically expensive to support disabled people to live as fully as non-disabled people, or for women to take time off to have children, or that maybe only a few transgender people will ever use a service. If we are saying that we can only achieve our full potential as a human race if we value the full diversity of humanity equally we have to do what that takes economically, in terms of our attitudes and in terms of our behaviour. Human rights are not about being cost effective but about valuing the diversity of humanity.

In some ways this process has begun within the disability movement with the introduction of Disability Living Allowance, which allows people with disabilities to hire people to provide support and care in the ways

that they deem to be important. They are evaluating their own lives and translating that into services that they require, instead of trying to create a life out of what services you can access in your area and what support your family and friends supply. The idea that paying for this help lessens its worth has been suggested – if you want to be paid to provide help to people then the help that you offer is worth less because of this. It's important to note that the burden of free care falls on women so this suggests the potential power of a shift in thinking (and consequently policy and services) in this area. Perhaps what makes some people uncomfortable with the concept of paid care controlled by the recipient is the challenge that it makes to the discrimination tools of charity and unpaid care used to oppress both people with disabilities and women.

Ending on a more general point it has been noted that very often the things that would improve society and diminish discrimination for disabled people would have benefit for all people (e.g. inclusive design in

public spaces, lifetime homes, learning assistants in classrooms). The same could be argued for the things that benefit women and address their discrimination (e.g. flexible working, inclusive transport systems, and a citizen's income). Indeed a move away from stereotypical and discriminatory gender roles would create more space for other identities that are challenged in the current status quo of gender binary thinking like LGB and T people, but also more generally for men who would like to have a greater role in bringing up their children but feel bound by gender roles to take a backseat. The disability and gender equality strands could be instrumental in understanding and highlighting how a less discriminatory more inclusive society would create a better standard of living for people outwith those identities.

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