

MDG 3 – PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN

FREEDOM FOR THE PERSON: GENDER AND DISABILITY

Lorraine Wapling

DEFINITION

Gender: refers to socially and culturally determined relationships between men and women. These include the different attributes, status, roles, responsibilities, opportunities and privileges accorded to women and men as well as their access to and control of resources and benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Pressures on disabled people are being intensified by gender. For women it can lead to increased isolation, low self-esteem and negative feelings (DAA, 1997).¹ For men it can lead to lower self-esteem as they appear unable to meet the expectations of provider, and protector:

These experiences have consequences in terms of education, employment, personal relationships, victimisation and abuse – that in turn reinforce the general images.

Despite the focus on gender and development, disabled people are still being left out of the debate. That's probably because for so long the non-disabled community has simply failed to acknowledge their sexuality. Disabled people are often regarded as asexual people whose lives are so different to the norm, they're not affected by mainstream issues.

DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES FOR DISABLED WOMEN AND MEN

Gendered studies of disability (Gerschick, 2000)² reveal the following patterns:

- poverty hits women and girls harder due to patriarchal property ownership structures;
- aid is less likely to reach women and girls who are less able to compete in situations of scarcity;
- disabled girls and women are more vulnerable to domestic violence;
- disabled girls are likely to find their access to education more limited than girls in general and even disabled boys;
- women and girls disabled by war have few resources to survive;
- disabled women and girls who are sexually abused are likely to have few if any social supports;
- more women than men are classified as disabled, particularly as ageing populations mean larger proportions of the elderly are disabled women;
- disabled women are more likely to be living on their own, or in their parental family than men;
- disabled women are more likely to be divorced and less likely to marry than disabled men;

- disabled women and girls are more likely to experience sexual violence in relationships and in institutions.

DISABLED WOMEN

It is often considered that disabled women and girls experience double marginalisation on account of their gender and impairment. In patriarchal societies, the social role of women and girls is often primarily defined through motherhood and homemaking. With few opportunities to fulfill those ideals, disabled women will experience more discrimination than non-disabled peers. With decreased access to social, political, health and economic opportunities, they are highly vulnerable to poverty – and also are at greater risk of sexual and physical abuse.

Unfortunately, there is as yet little robust data available on the life experience of disabled women and girls. But from evidence produced by a growing number of disabled women's organisations, it's possible to see how their status as women makes it much harder for them to work their way out of poverty. Disabled women are far less likely to be able to own land or inherit property – and any children they have will be highly vulnerable as a result. Disabled women are often single parents, too. If they become disabled through

childbirth – as a result of lack of access to health facilities – it is common for husbands to divorce them. Similarly, if a woman gives birth to a disabled child, she is more likely to be left alone.

Despite the growing evidence of levels of marginalisation experienced by disabled women and girls, few mainstream women's initiatives routinely include them. The women's movement needs to be more aware of the needs of disabled women – and for mainstream programmes to be more inclusive.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Center for Reproductive Rights: *Reproductive violence*
http://reproductiverights.org/sites/default/files/documents/pub_bp_disabilities.pdf

Practical Action: *Women with disabilities – cooking, fires and smoke. A case study from Pakistan*
<http://www.practicalaction.org.uk/energy/boiling-point/docs/energy/docs44/bp46rahm.pdf>

WHO/UNFPA Guidance Note: *Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities* Nora Groce et al, Geneva, World Health Organisation, 2009
<http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/general/9789241598682/en/index.html>

¹ DAA (1997) *Resource Kit No 6*, London

² Gerschick, T.J. (2000) *Towards a theory of disability and gender*. In *Signs* 25(4): pp. 1263 - 1269.