



How Double Labor Market Barriers Hurt Women with Disabilities

David Pettinicchio, University of Toronto

Despite legal protections meant to prevent discrimination and improve working conditions, both women and people with disabilities are still disadvantaged and marginalized in the labor market. Despite gains in education and increases in labor force participation, men still out-earn women. Employment rates among people with disabilities have been declining for the last quarter century and workers with disabilities earn considerably less than workers without disabilities.

The reasons for such persistent disparities are many. Employers may view people with disabilities as being weak, unproductive, or less competent. Such prejudicial assumptions vary – and people with mental or cognitive disabilities are often especially vulnerable to being seen as unstable or dangerous.

Women with disabilities may suffer double disadvantages if negative effects of gender and disability intersect. Both women and disabled people are often “ghettoized” in precarious and nonstandard work arrangements, as employers and society direct such people to occupations deemed “suitably matched” to their status. For example, women are often encouraged or redirected to “women’s work” which typically includes jobs that are lower status, lower paying, and less stable. And disabled people may get similar treatment based on assumptions about what they can and cannot do in workplaces. Disabled women may end up being “twice penalized” or in “double jeopardy.” This can happen because both of the groups they are part of are regularly subjected to discriminatory structures and attitudes in the job market and in society as a whole.

Interpreting Key Findings from a New Study

Understanding how disability and gender intersect to shape employment and earnings can shed light on why employers may go so far as not to hire disabled women at all, even if some regularly hire women or people with disabilities. Michelle Maroto and I used data from 2010 through 2015 that covered 596,199 working-age adults, including 413,007 who were employed and had earnings. After analyzing these data to examine disparities in employment and earnings by gender and disability type, we found the following:

- Women with disabilities, especially those with multiple disabilities, had the lowest employment rates and earnings levels.
- Women with **work-limiting** disabilities earned approximately 18% less than men with similar disabilities.
- Among men and women with **any difficulty or limitation**, women earned approximately 28% less than the men in the category.

Our findings suggest that different types of disabilities interact with gender to limit employment and lower earnings – in effect indicating an overall hierarchy of disadvantage. In this hierarchy, women with multiple and

cognitive disabilities continually have the lowest employment rates and earnings levels. Men without disabilities had an **employment rate of 82%** and **average earnings of \$59,000** per year, and men with multiple disabilities had an **employment rate of 17%** and **average earnings of \$37,000**. However, women with multiple disabilities had the **employment rate of 16%** and **earnings of \$29,000**, putting them at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

Researchers must also look beyond labor market inequality to examine the ways gendered discrimination excludes women with disabilities from education, health, and social services. Such additional forms of discrimination can contribute to and perpetuate their marginalization in the job market. Given that employers see education as an indicator of human capital potential, when disabled women are disadvantaged in education prior to entering the labor market, they can end up facing economic disadvantages that compound and accumulate across a lifetime.

Policy Lessons from the Labor Market Experiences of Disabled Women

Disability is often seen and treated differently than other status characteristics like race and gender. This is perhaps nowhere more concretely evident than in the way the U.S. handles civil rights for its citizens with disabilities. For decades, a system of parallel rights policies for the disabled has borrowed from the Civil Rights Act, but also departed from it. Disability policies like the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act have not been able to assure equal rights and protection from labor market discrimination. Enforcement has been difficult because the courts have ruled conservatively about the rights of the disabled, and also because policymakers treat disability differently than other status markers of social disadvantage.

Parallel rights systems have also made it hard for researchers and policymakers to pay sufficient attention to the double discriminatory binds faced by people who are both disabled and members of socially disadvantaged gender, racial, and ethnic groups. Thinking more about how disability intersects with other status characteristics can shed light on why such intersections generate extra inequalities – and point the way toward policies to redress double disadvantages.

To improve labor market outcomes for women with disabilities, antidiscrimination policies should not ignore the important role of college education and general work experience in helping people overcome labor-market barriers. Vocational and educational training programs must keep up with employer demands, and such programs must ensure that training includes women, people with disabilities, and especially women with disabilities. Programs should not shunt groups facing certain challenges, but rather encourage groups such as women with disabilities to pursue higher paying jobs by providing them with the skills, education, and support they need to succeed in competitive labor markets.

Read more in David Pettinicchio and Michelle Maroto, "Employment Outcomes Among Men and Women with Disabilities: How the Intersection of Gender and Disability Status Shapes Labor Market Inequality," *Research in Social Science and Disability*, (2017): 3-33.