

# Working Life of Women With Disabilities—A Review

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*The aim of this study was to present the situation of women with disabilities on the labour market. Women with disabilities suffer from social and professional discrimination. They are discriminated because of their gender and disability. The Q1 Labour Force Participation Study (2013) showed that, in Poland, labour force participation for men and women with disabilities was 29.4% and 14.7%, respectively, while the unemployment rate was 16.1% for men and 17.2% for women. Quarterly information on employment, unemployment and economic inactivity was gathered from a Labour Force Survey in the first quarter of 2013; data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy were also included. The participants of the survey were 15 years old or older; they were members of a sample household. The methodology was based on definitions recommended by the International Labour Office and Eurostat. It is important that women with disabilities are substantially less professionally active, while the unemployment rate for them is only slightly higher.*

disability    women with disabilities    employment    physical disability

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Disabilities substantially affect social participation, labour force participation and the quality of life of a disabled person. Disabilities affect mostly women; they suffer from social and professional discrimination.

The World Health Organization's definition distinguishes impairments defined as loss of or significant deviation from normal structure or physiological body function excluding mental functions, activity limitations defined as difficulties an individual may have in executing activities, and participation restrictions defined as problems an individual may have while involved in life situations [1].

A disability can be congenital, i.e., existing from birth due to genetic defects, or acquired, i.e.,

caused by a mechanical injury or certain environmental factors. Because of their problems, people with disabilities are less active on the labour market than people without disabilities. Studies show that they also suffer from blatant discrimination at work. The feeling of being discriminated in terms of employment depends on the character of a disability. People with physical disabilities feel less discriminated than people with other disabilities [2]. People whose disability is clearly visible experience more employment difficulties, especially if a job involves establishing social relations [3].

Gender is an important factor affecting the employment structure and is often used in labour market statistics. The aim of this study was to present the situation of women with disabilities on the labour market.

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## 2. INTERNATIONAL STUDIES ON EMPLOYING WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Women with disabilities suffer from social and professional discrimination. This is so-called double discrimination: on the basis of both gender and disability [4].

In 2007, the employment rate for men without disabilities (77.08%) was higher than for women without disabilities (61.17%); for men and women with disabilities (50.31% and 41.08%, respectively), these proportions were substantially lower. According to a report on the mobility and integration of people with disabilities, a comparison of the employment rate of women and men with disabilities showed that in 2007 Finland was the only country where the employment rate was higher for women than for men (53.74% and 51.34%, respectively) [5]. In some countries, e.g., in Cyprus or Italy, the employment rates for men with disabilities (67.20% and 56.22%, respectively) were significantly higher than for women with disabilities (64.22% and 34.99%, respectively). The lowest employment rate for women with disabilities was in Hungary (26.12%) [5].

The report also showed employment rates for people with and without disabilities between 15 and 64 years old (Table 1). The highest rate for both groups was for people aged 25–49; the lowest was for people aged 15–24. The youngest group consisted of students; this explains the low employment rate. The employment rate was higher for men with and without disabilities than for women [5].

According to a report on the labour market situation of people with disabilities, in 2008 in the European Union, the employment rate among people with disabilities was low and there was also inequality between women and men in this

respect. Slovenia was the only country where women were more often employed to do so-called ordinary work than men. Men were more often employed in a protected working environment (except for Slovenia and Slovakia). Men also dominated among the unemployed and those looking for work (except for the Czech Republic, Latvia, Germany and Belgium). The number of professionally inactive women was higher in the Czech Republic, Ireland and Poland, while the number of professionally inactive men was higher in France and the UK [6].

According to a European Council report on discrimination against women with disabilities, it was accepted that men with disabilities had to have access to work, while women do not. Women were more likely to be employed in low-status and low-paid jobs [7].

According to the Swiss studies quoted in the report, Switzerland put less emphasis on vocational rehabilitation for women than for men. The studies carried out in the Netherlands and Portugal indicated that more men than women were successful in finding a job. The Swedish studies showed that there was no response to the needs for vocational rehabilitation of women with disabilities [7].

In the early 1980s, data from industrialized countries indicated that women with disabilities, in comparison to men, were at a disadvantage. Women with disabilities had negative experience with employment and earned less than men. Men were more likely to be employed than women [8]. The salaries of women employed full time, in spite of their higher level of education, were at the level of 56% of the salaries of men employed full time. Moreover, women more often needed support from their environment [9].

The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey on 47 000 respondents in the USA

**TABLE 1. Employment Rate of People With and Without Disabilities by Age and Gender in the European Union, 2007 [5]**

Age (years)	Without Disabilities (%)			With Disabilities (%)		
	Men	Women	Difference	Men	Women	Difference
15–24	36.72	28.93	7.79	31.47	27.07	4.39
25–49	91.06	74.07	16.99	64.92	55.45	9.47
50–64	74.42	54.25	20.17	40.40	29.47	10.93

confirmed these findings. About 45.3% of male and 55.1% of female respondents were unemployed; for people without disabilities the rates were 11.7% and 25.1%, respectively. There were also differences in labour force participation between women with and without disabilities aged 35–49; women without medical restrictions were at an advantage [10].

Moreover, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey carried out between 1995 and 2005 pointed out disability and gender as the two strongest predictors of unemployment [11]. Mwachofi's study, based on a similar study performed in the late 1970s, concluded that men were not likely to suffer from poverty [12]. Women with disabilities were usually seen as dependent on people around them, passive, unable to fulfil and inadequate to perform professional roles [13].

Women with disabilities compared to those without disabilities obtained lower salaries and were also less likely to find a job when unemployed. The same study showed that women's self-esteem affected employment [14].

### 3. WORKING LIFE OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN POLAND

The 2010 report of the European Parliament on the mobility and integration of people with disabilities into the labour market discussed the situation of women and men with and without disabilities in Poland [5]. In 2007, Poland was among

the three countries with the lowest employment rate (under 30%) for women with disabilities. There was also a substantial disproportion between the employment rate of people with and without disabilities. For men and women with disabilities the employment rate was 36.67% and 29.5%, respectively, and for men and women without disabilities the employment rate was 72.02% and 54.15%, respectively. Women with disabilities were in a worse position with an employment rate lower than the rate of men with disabilities [5].

In 2008, the highest percentage of professionally inactive women with disabilities were working-age women (56.9%) [15]. Table 2 shows data of people with and without disabilities by gender and labour status.

Labour market participation of people with disabilities, compared to those without disabilities, was significantly lower (~16% of the total labour market). The percentage of those employed and unemployed was lower but the percentage of those professionally inactive was slightly higher. The same results were seen in the division by gender, when comparing people with and without disabilities. However, the percentage of women with disabilities on the labour market (16.7%) was slightly higher than that of men (14.9%) [16].

Women dominated in the employed and unemployed groups. However, men dominated in the group of professionally inactive people. The data were on people with congenital and acquired disabilities [16].

**TABLE 2. People With and Without Disabilities Aged 15 and Over by Labour Status [16]**

Labour Force	Total (%)	Employed (%)	Unemployed (%)	Professionally Inactive (%)
<b>Total</b>				
without disabilities	84.1	95.9	91.9	70.3
with disabilities	15.9	4.1	8.1	29.7
total	100	100	100	100
<b>Men</b>				
without disabilities	85.1	95.9	92.1	66.5
with disabilities	14.9	4.1	7.9	33.5
total	100	100	100	100
<b>Women</b>				
without disabilities	83.3	95.7	91.7	72.6
with disabilities	16.7	4.3	8.3	27.4
total	100	100	100	100

The Q1 Labour Force Participation Study (2013) showed that labour force participation of men and women with disabilities was 19.4% and 14.7%, respectively. The employment rate was 16.3% for men and 12.2% for women; the unemployment rate was 16.1% and 17.2%, respectively. Therefore, women were less active, but the unemployment rate for them was slightly higher [17]. According to Brzezińska, Kaczan, Piotrowski, et al.'s study, most professionally inactive people with disabilities were female, both those who had worked before (57.1%) and who had never worked (55.4%) [18].

Women with disabilities, despite their high aspirations, were unemployed more often than men and were unable to find their place on the labour market. According to a Polish publication on the situation, needs and possibilities of people with disabilities, which studied 100 000 adults with disabilities, 24% of the participants worked and 76% of the participants were unemployed [19].

#### 4. EMPLOYMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Work has a major influence on the quality of life of people with disabilities. Moreover, women with disabilities face more difficulties in professional and everyday life, because of the specific roles ascribed to women and men in the society.

Work can help people with disabilities satisfy their needs. Work gives a sense of security, helps to integrate with the society, which enables self-fulfilment. Work is also a source of income. The absence of this fundamental activity contributes to the economic dependency of people with disabilities. Starting a family is largely determined by the economic factor, which also forms the perception of the achieved social status.

Professional fulfilment of people with disabilities helps them to achieve personal goals and fulfil life aspirations; these contribute to improved social status. Working people with disabilities feel that they belong to a social group (team of employees), they feel useful, they are able to acquire new skills or to develop those they already have. Work becomes their life objective

and gives a meaning to their existence, it determines their quality of life.

The World Health Organization defines quality of life "as individuals' perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (p. 11) [20].

Andrews and Withey described a two-dimensional model where the perception of quality of life is based on emotional response [21]. There are few studies on specific problems of the influence of work on the quality of life of women with disabilities. According to Barisin, Benjak and Vuletić, the quality of life of unemployed women with disabilities was lower than that of employed women with disabilities; the quality of life was lower in such areas as mental health, social relations and work functioning, and life environment. Having a family improved the quality of life for both employed and unemployed women with disabilities [22].

Most available studies on the quality of life with the participation of people with disabilities are not gender-specific. Therefore, the results of these studies provide only approximate information on the quality of life of women with disabilities, without considering specific problems of this group [23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28].

#### 5. CONCLUSION

People with disabilities face barriers in access to work on today's labour market; this results in lower labour force participation. However, women with disabilities are at an even greater disadvantage. Most people professionally inactive and looking for work are female. Only 42.2% of people with disabilities in Europe are employed; comparing this to 64.5% of employed people without disabilities proves that labour market participation of people with disabilities is low.

According to the results of studies carried out in the early 1980s, women with disabilities in industrialized countries were at a disadvantage compared to men with disabilities, who were more likely to be employed. The salaries of

women working full time were at the level of 56% of the salaries of men working full time.

The problems of employment, vocational and social rehabilitation and the quality of life of women with disabilities are a significant social and economic concern. Further studies should be performed to identify the cause and to establish principles preventing exclusion of people with disabilities.

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