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Women with Disabilities in the Workplace: A Need for Advancement Opportunities

Women in the workplace is not a new concept, particularly given the fact they constitute about half of the workforce in many countries. Despite their increased presence, women continue to be challenged in their ability to advance within the workplace or, in some instances, acquire solid, well-paying, meaningful positions. Reasons for this are varied. Women continue to find themselves charged with the responsibility of maintaining their home and raising their children while also being a part of the workforce; thus, causing them to consider a non-linear career or employment path. Others may not have been raised or encouraged from a young age or throughout their development to want and to pursue a career. Related to this point is the notion that families, educators (i.e., classroom teachers, guidance counselors), and employers may not have the same level of expectations of females compared to their male counterparts. Whatever the reason(s), a single message is promoted: "Women are not properly encouraged throughout society to consider and strive for the best occupation possible."

It is important to recognize that achieving positions of influence and leadership may not be an essential value for some, but this should not be equated with not wanting to have an education, a well-paying job, or employment options as a part of one's career trajectory. Compounding the inequities women face are those experienced by women with disabilities. More specifically, women with disabilities encounter additional barriers and challenges when they want to go to work, advance, or succeed in the workplace.

For instance, some may be in a position where they need to ask for workplace accommodations but haven't yet developed the art and skill of diplomacy or self-advocacy. Others may know the face of overt or covert discrimination, lowered expectations to succeed (i.e., by families, teachers, or employers), and preferences or differences in mentorship and career advancement savvy should they strive to move up the career ladder.

Related to these barriers is the presence of lowered societal expectations for women with disabilities some of which include: (a) beliefs that they are worthy of lower-skilled or stereotyped jobs, (b) expectations to quietly deal with work place inequities or else run the risk of being terminated, (c) personal experiences that promote an inner belief that they cannot adequately compete for employment compared to their counterparts without disabilities or men with disabilities, (d) micro-aggressions in the work setting, (e) experience of double- or triple-stigmatization (i.e., being a female and/or from another ethnic background, having a disability), and (f) societal and attitudinal biases pertaining to being a woman with a disability, just to name a few.

Women with disabilities have many abilities and are a diverse group of individuals. Many want and desire to work, be as independent as possible, and to create the best life they can. Some may want to advance in their job or reach a position of leadership and influence. Understanding this is of great importance as research has found that women with disabilities are more likely to be single or divorced, have even fewer economic and financial resources, receive a lower quality of health care (as a collective and historically speaking) than their male peers with disabilities or compared to women without disabilities. Additionally, society simply expects them to accept unequitable treatment that others would clearly find offensive were the roles reversed.

In an effort to change this trend and to promote the abilities and employment options for women with disabilities, people are asked to consider what they can do to encourage, educate, train, employ, or advance women with disabilities in the workplace. Change is sometimes

difficult and can feel foreign especially when people realize they have been a part of the “problem” in obstructing equitable access to employment, career advancement, and to a better quality of life and have not been a part of the “solution.” However, disability should not be viewed as something that happens to someone else, because it is a natural part of the human experience particularly given the increased life span privileges many of us know and love. More candidly, it is a biological reality that sooner or later, should we live long enough many will know and experience a decline in sight, hearing, functional mobility, cognitive reasoning, and decision-making skills. Rather than resign ourselves to the fact that “disability” is a punishment or a negative life event (as has long been an erroneous societal belief), about other people and something that does not affect us, or is something we hope to “sweep under the rug,” society is hopefully striving to understand disability as a natural part of life and is not something that has to be feared or misunderstood.

The plight and experiences of women with disabilities is a topic Dr. Stuntzner knows rather well from both a personal and a professional standpoint. Dr. Stuntzner teaches graduate students studying to become rehabilitation counseling professionals about the issues, concerns, and needs of men and women with disabilities as a part of the Rehabilitation Counseling and Human Services program curriculum, but also devotes time educating her students about the differences encountered by women with disabilities.

Dr. Stuntzner has written one article on sexuality, self-compassion, and women with disabilities and has another article under review. This article specifically focuses on the mentorship needs of women with disabilities. Dr. Stuntzner also discusses some related points mentioned throughout this article in her book entitled, “*Resilience and Coping with Disability: The Family After*” slated for release in 2015 and will be for sale on Amazon.com. Additional information can be found about some of her work, research, and publications on her website: www.therapeutic-healing-disability.com. She may also be reached at the University of Idaho – Coeur d’Alene Harbor Center by phone: (208) 292-1409 or via email: stuntzner@uidaho.edu.