Women with Disabilities

Alone on the Playground

by Mary Runté

L'auteure nous parle des difficultés qu'elle a rencontrées en tant que professionnelle handicapée employée dans le secteur des services sociaux et donne quelques pistes pour rencontrer ces défis.

Women with disabilities face double jeopardy—as women and as persons with disabilities. We are "often regarded by the non-disabled community as incapable of fulfilling adult social roles" including the role of employee.

Childhood: The school yard scene is depressingly familiar to many of us—team leaders have been appointed, names are called out one-by-one, and the large pool of children part slowly down the middle. The chosen children call out advice to the team leader: "Take Tommy, he catches well!"; "We need Jane, she's a fast runner!" The pool narrows. Panic, which starts to seep into the expressions of the remaining children, is replaced by relief when their names are called and they swagger over to their team: "I was chosen, I wasn't last!" But, someone must be last. The lone child stands helpless as the team leaders debate his/her merits: "You take him—we had him last time!"; "We don't want him on our team"; "She's a loser!"

The playgrounds of my youth were ultimately supplanted by university classrooms, boardrooms, and offices. The rules of the game, however, remain strikingly similar.

Dual identity/double jeopardy

As a woman, and as a person with a physical disability, I have spent much of my employed life on the sidelines watching as my peers were selected to the elite project teams, sought out as collaborators for group projects, and offered the most desirable career positions.

I am physically disabled as a result of a vascular disease. The use of my hands is permanently impaired; I sometimes have difficulty walking. While my condition has deteriorated over time, even now, unless I am wearing my hand splints, or am observed while having an acute attack, or attempting a contraindicated task, my disabilities are often invisible.

Women with disabilities face double jeopardy—as women and as persons with disabilities—in a society dominated by able-bodied males (Prilleltenski; Fine and Ash; Deegan and Brooks; Hillyer; Blackwell-Stratton). We are "often regarded by the non-disabled community [including by some able-bodied women] as incapable of fulfilling adult social roles" including the role of employee (Prilleltensky 88). "The effect of this rolelessness is that the disabled woman lives as a kind of social nomad. There is no place she can call her own" (Blackwell-Stratton, *et al.* 307). Within the disability movement, she must contend with sexism; within the feminist movement, she must contend with colleagues who do not appreciate her disability-based politics (Blackwell-Stratton, *et al.*). "All women feel sexist oppression under the patriarchy, but that oppression comes in very many disguises, with varying degree of privilege ..." Women facing ableism, ageism, racism, classism, and

> all the other "isms" which signal special oppression ... [are] forced for their own survival to face issues which others may also need to face, but have the luxury to ignore. (Healey 70-71)

In Canada, 40.3 per cent of disabled persons of working age have jobs; only 30.7 per cent of women with disabilities are employed (Roeher Institute). Even though American statistics show that more than three-quarters of accommodations necessary to sustain employment for persons with disabilities cost less than U.S.$1,000 (Minton), only 6.1 per cent of Canadian women with disabilities who are employed have had job accommodations made for them (Roeher Institute). The U.S. Department of Labor's Glass Ceiling Commission recently reported that "people with disabilities are underrepresented in better-paid managerial and professional jobs and overrepresented in lower-paid and operator jobs." Baldwin *et al.* present an empirical study which relates wage penalty to the degree and nature of disability. For men, limitations to physical strength and mobility had the most significant impact upon wage; for women, wage was most impacted by disability which limited sensory capacities and physical appearance.

This article describes some of the barriers I have encountered as a woman with a disability employed in professional positions within the social service sector, and my strategies to overcome these challenges. The experiences related herein reflect *my* perception of actual events. I do not believe that these themes are unique to my circumstance, nor to the field in which I worked. Nor do I believe that my experiences reflect the experiences or values of all women with disabilities.

Strategy #1: visible and silent

Stereotypes and biases serve as barriers to employment, to education, and to social satisfaction. Persons with disabilities are often impeded more by other people's attitudes than by their own physical limitations. Many persons with disabilities find that their capabilities are overlooked by employers who focus exclusively upon incapacity (Fine and Asch).

Fifteen years ago, I entered the workforce believing that it is a meritocratous system. I was convinced that my competencies would, ultimately, lead to my being recognized as an employee "headed to the top." For several years, I concurrently attended university and worked full-time, quietly waiting to be noticed, to be appreciated for my skills, to be promoted. For several years, I wasn't noticed, I wasn't appreciated for my skills, and I wasn't promoted. Thinking the problem must be "me," I became the ideal employee at the office, the over-achieving student in the classroom. I *had to* be the top of my class; I *had to* have the most challenging work assignments. I was determined to prove to everyone that I was the most capable and the hardest-working individual they had ever encountered. Nonetheless, I still felt excluded.

It was assumed by one manager that despite my having made explicit statements to the contrary, I didn't want to be promoted because I had carved out a "safe niche" at my current level and that I "didn't want more challenges than those I face because of the disability."

I sought out an explanation for my lack of career development. I was surprised by the answers I received.

It was assumed by one manager, for example, that, despite my having made explicit statements to the contrary, I didn't want to be promoted because I had carved out a "safe niche" at my current level in the company and that I "didn't want more challenges than those I face because of the disability." On another occasion:

I had decided that my performance review would be the best time to raise the question of "opportunities for advancement" with my supervisor. A senior team had formed in the previous year which was addressing an area of keen interest to me. I believed that my background and personality would really contribute to this team's efforts. The performance review was almost over. He was pleased with my work. Relief. Take a deep breath. "I would like to talk about advancement...." I outlined my skills, my verbal resume. "Did you have a target in mind?" he asked. "What about the team which is examining.... I believe my skills would contribute to their efforts." "I don't know," he said "it wouldn't be fair to the others on the team to have to have to compensate for you not being able to perform all the assigned tasks." "Besides," he added, "it would be embarrassing for you to have to explain to these people that you can't write...." When I challenged this manager on the blatant fact that the only "task" I couldn't perform would be taking minutes, and that this task was only assigned to one group member, the recorder, he stated that he had assumed that this would be the role which the other team members would expect me to fill—"the guys hate taking notes."

As I am a woman, it was assumed I would perform the stereotypical role of secretary if assigned to this team. As I am disabled, and consequently unable to fulfill this inappropriately restrictive role, I was not considered a suitable candidate for advancement. The glass ceiling for a disabled woman turns her office into a crawl space.

Current business literature addresses the value of diversity in the workplace—"empowering people of all kinds to develop and contribute their own unique talents to solving our business problems" (Ingram and Steffey 21). Employees are thus recognized as being equal while being different (Schreiber). An overview of the literature on workplace diversity reveals an interesting trend which merits further analysis. While many studies list "physical ability" as a variable when defining "diversity," discussions of disability (or "physical ability") are notably absent from the body of the papers. The focus tends to immediately narrow to a discussion of race/ethnic diversity.

Ragins, Wanguri, Schreiber, and others discuss the tendency of managers to attract, select, retain, mentor, and promote employees who share the same characteristics as those who are currently in place within the organization. Those who, because of gender, race, ethnicity, class, physical ability, etc., are perceived (consciously or not) as "different" are thus excluded from this process. This tendency can manifest itself in

> stereotyping, differential organizational socialization, subtle bias, microinequities, and declining organizational communication effectiveness, and can lead to employee perceptions of communicative and interpersonal inequity in the workplace. (Wanguri 445)

As women and persons with disabilities remain underrepresented in management, they are less likely to be employed or promoted within an organization.

The behaviours which limit the opportunities for those who are perceived as "different" are often subtle and "may or may not be intentional but have the effect of excluding and marginalizing women and minority groups and ultimately undermine the self-confidence, performance, and development of power" (Ragins 93). The manager whom I cite in the preceding example did not consider his assessment of my potential for promotion to be intentionally discriminatory. The lack of feedback, mentoring, and career development I had received are potential outcomes of this unintentional, but still equally damaging marginalization.

Strategy #2: being invisible

I determined that to become more

"visible," my disability would have to be "invisible." I strategically adapted my environment to minimize any deleterious or observable interaction between my work and my disability. I could not hide my gender; I chose to hide my disability. I only wore my hand splints if my office door was closed. I begged out of taking notes in meetings because "my writing is impossible for anyone to read, even me." I pushed my physical capacities to the limit, but never let others see the pain. I recall one horrible day when, after work, I stood propped against the hallway wall, praying for the office building's elevator to be empty so I could let the tears of pain flow privately.

My plan worked. My career advanced quickly. It is only in retrospect, however, that I recognize that I had attained this success by denying a significant part of who I am, by pretending to be able-bodied when I wasn't, by accepting the assumption that having a disability makes me inferior (Fine and Asch). A lesbian friend sometimes refers to the period of time when she was "in the closet;" I look back on that part of my life as "being in the elevator."

On becoming visible ...

I did not choose one day to become "visible"—to have others know of either the limitations or of the pain imposed upon me by the disease with which I struggle. During my first few years in the workplace, I had naively assumed that my disability needs would be accommodated by employers and that perceptions of the disabled would not inhibit my career advancement. For the next several years, I remained silent and pretended that my disabilities did not effect my ability to complete any work-related tasks. As time passed, however, my condition deteriorated, and I no longer had the choice to remain invisible; I could not sustain the facade.

The concluding statement of Pothier has haunted me for some time: "People cannot feel that they really belong unless they are made to feel that other people at least recognize their existence" (17). I also had to learn to recognize and appreciate my own existence. I had internalized the societal norm that one cannot be both disabled and a competent employee; disabled and a desirable woman. When my condition began to deteriorate rapidly and markedly impact my ability to perform my job, I had to fight for others to recognize me as a competent, intelligent women who has physical disabilities, even before I truly accepted my own worth. I had to allow myself to grieve the loss of abilities and learn to value, as I do now, the attributes which I have developed because of my disabilities.

I continue to experience having a physical disability as challenging—seemingly simple tasks, such as signing my name on a cheque, present unique challenges which require either modification to, or elimination of, the task. While challenging, however, I believe that having this disability has complemented my development as a manager. Unless a person with a disability is tenacious and a strategic problem-solver, s/he can neither adapt to nor overcome challenges in an environment where, even if policy supports inclusion of the disabled, the requisite sensitivity to implement these policies is usually lacking.

Strategy #3: being visible

I remember the day I first approached my supervisor to discuss disability issues and to open negotiations regarding modifications to my responsibilities which I now considered necessary if I was to remain employed at this particular work site. While sympathetic, she informed me that the organization would not be willing to accommodate my needs. I was asked to resign, even though the modifications required to enable me to complete my responsibilities were minor, such as providing wrist supports for the computer and allowing me to take shorter, more frequent, breaks.

A number of my subsequent employers were able to make requisite changes to the physical environment and to my responsibilities to facilitate continued employment in the face of a degenerating condition. Some adaptations, such as ensuring I did not have to take notes during staff meetings, were made with minimal disruption. Other changes, however, such as purchasing a computer with voice recognition software, represented an untenable expense for the employer whom I approached with this need. I was amazed at the difficulty I had in finding assistance to keep an employee in the face of a progressive disability. Everyone wanted to encourage hiring folks with disabilities, but making changes to keep one? It seemed beyond them. All in all I have to say that inside government (both federal and provincial) and out, I did not find a welcoming atmosphere for this effort.

While I continue to applaud the efforts of the employer who eventually succeeded in his efforts to acquire enabling technologies, I recall being frustrated by the heroic portrait painted of him by the support agencies with which we became involved; an image which he too rejected. I was often told that I was lucky to have an employer such as he; we thought that he was lucky to have an employee such as me. His decision to modify the task requirements of my job and

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acquire enabling technologies was influenced by an ideological commitment *and* by a pragmatic desire not to lose the skills of a excellent employee. He was not "doing me a favour"; he made a good business decision.

Strategy #4: career development through education

A lack of education is a significant barrier to employment (Roeher Institute; Blackwell-Stratton *et al.*; Cowans; Wagle). This is especially true for women with disabilities: "As one woman put it, 'We can't do manual labor, so we have to cultivate our minds. The more disabled you are, the more you need a good education'" (Matthews qtd. in Blackwell Stratton *et al.* 320). Nonetheless, only 42 per cent of working-age Canadian women with a disability in Canada have completed high school or obtained post-secondary education (Roeher Institute). The "Catch-22" for a person with a disability is that while career development is often linked to higher education, the barriers to a disabled person attaining an advanced education (or any training, for that matter) are difficult, and sometimes impossible, to overcome (Wagle; Scott). I believe that access to education (at all levels) is crucial to improving employment equity for women with disabilities.

I returned to the classroom two years ago to pursue a Masters of Business Administration (MBA). I returned to the classroom believing that I had reached a career plateau, and that the only way to break through the glass ceiling imposed by gender and disability was to obtain an advanced degree. The MBA is a training ground for the next generation of managers. The models of interaction reinforced by such programs, including the inclusion (or exclusion) of women and persons with disability, is indicative of how these students will interact with employees upon graduation.

Being visible in the classroom

I knew that limitations on my ability to write, and chronic, incapacitating pain would add additional challenges to the pursuit of the degree, just as they had presented challenges in employment. Aware of the existence of policies of inclusion and support services, and primed by a few years of positive career experiences, I believed that, like "Wonder Woman," I could defend my principles, educate my classmates and instructors about disability issues, and deflect bullets with my metal hand splints and the Disability Handbook—all without mussing my hair. I did not, however, anticipate such a difficult battle. I did not anticipate the rejection by peers; the ambivalence or hostility of instructors. I did not anticipate the alienation, the *aloneness*, which has marked my experience.

I stood outside the classroom door, my peers scrambling past on their way to the library, to their next class, or to the cafeteria in pursuit of a much needed cup of coffee. I glanced inside, and saw the instructor reviewing a student's assignment as a few others hovered nearby, waiting for a moment of his time. I, too, was waiting to speak to the professor, but unlike the other students had specifically been asked to wait for him in the hallway outside the classroom. The midterm exam was a couple of weeks away, and I needed to discuss with him my request for modified examination procedures. He had previously indicated that he would prefer that I take the same exam as my peers, but dictate the answers into a cassette tape. After a few minutes, the students disbanded and the professor emerged from the classroom and thanked me for waiting. He appeared quite nervous, glancing over his shoulder, as if assessing the proximity of nearby students; he kept his voice low. After we had spent a couple of minutes discussing the exam, he leaned towards me, as if sharing a secret, and lowered his voice even further "You can take the exam orally, but don't tell anyone."

Inclusion of those who are perceived as "different" may require modification to standard procedures, a reality which may engender discomfort. Fearing that he would be accused of bias, this professor preferred that any modifications to existing protocols be invisible to others. The concern is that treating some students (or employees) differently, is akin to treating them preferentially. Hence, the impulse is to modify procedures only minimally, so that others continue to perceive standards as equal, and to keep these modifications secret.

A professor who modifies his evaluation method to accommodate my needs, like an employer who makes reasonable accommodations to facilitate my employment, is not doing me a *favour;* I am not being afforded special *privileges.* I am pleased when accommodations are made so that I may be equitably evaluated, but I am not *grateful.* I am thankful that I have the opportunity to receive an education, but I do not feel that, more than another student, that I must say "*thank you*" to those who are merely providing a service to which I am entitled, and for which I am paying. Neither professors nor I have any need to pretend that modifications to testing procedures have not been made.

Several professors have expressed concern that, should other students learn that the exam protocol has been altered for me, that they will demand equivalent service. I remind these professors that I am not requesting modified procedures because I don't like physically writing exams, I am requesting modified procedures because I *cannot* physically write exams.

Many of the instructors in my program evaluate using time-limited, written examinations. Some professors, although willing to adapt the administration of the exam, are not willing to adapt the method of evaluation. In terms of evaluation and opportunity, my perception is that many professors, administrators, and students (like many employers and employees), fail to differentiate between "equitable" and "equal" treatment. In my experience in this program, professors often interpret "fair" to mean undeviatingly the same, rather than equitable. By taking the same examination as my classmates, these professors are satisfied that I am being evaluated on the same parameters as other students. They are trying to make the evaluation method *equal* to, or the same as, that applied to the others. An exam designed to be administered in a written fashion, however, is not the same exam when it is taken orally, whether one believes it to be easier, or more difficult. An exam physically written by a student for whom writing is nearly impossible, is not the same exam as when it is taken by a student for whom writing is not a challenge.

Is the purpose of an examination to assess one's ability to write (or walk, or speak, or hear ...), or is it to assess a student's level of knowledge? If the same criteria for assessing "level of knowledge" is applied to some students using a written examination and to other students through an alternate means, the method whereby one collects such data can vary and the comparison between students remains valid (Runté). If the intent of the test is to ascertain the level of comprehension which has been achieved by a student, then this is what should be evaluated. Not, whether a student can write. What is needed, is equitable evaluation. Students, future managers, observe a model which implies that the modifications necessary to facilitate employment for persons with disabilities must be invisible and not result in divergent processes.

My peers: still alone on the playground

Closeted away in a study room in the basement of the business school, a group of students meet to discuss forming a team for the cumulative group project, arguably the most important part of the MBA program. The purpose of the meeting is to select additional team members from the vast pool of candidates. One-by-one, names are proposed and the merits of each student explicated: "Jane is smart, but she's in accounting and we already have two accountants." As each name is put forward, the students vote on whether to add the candidate's name to the interview list. A student asks: "What about Mary—she's bright, has lots of work experience in an organization not dissimilar to our site, she has a specialization, which we need...." Another student counters: "She has that problem with her hands and can't write, I don't want someone on our team whom we'll have to carry." "I don't want to take the chance," another student states, "the project is too important." The vote is called. Mary's name is not added to the interview list.

I have been explicitly excluded from membership in some groups because of a perception of incapacity, either because of gender or because of disability. I believe in the value of diversity as expounded in the literature; differing experiences and strengths can maximize the quality of any collaborative project. All persons have strengths and limitations. I believe that MBA students for whom the value of diversity is experienced and reinforced in the classroom will be more inclusive of those whom they perceive as "different" when, upon graduation, they become managers.

Conclusion

I would like to say that I just woke up one day, primed for a fight for recognition and acceptance. I would like to say that I am never embarrassed to wear my splints in public, fearing that they detract from my attractiveness as a woman, or that I am not terrified of judgment or rejection when I have to approach a prospective employer or a professor about my disability and the need for modifications to enable my participation. There are days, however, when I would rather suffer extra pain than have my splints clash with the outfit I am wearing; and I still am inclined to ask for minimal accommodation for my disability, rather than for the degree of modification which would be most appropriate. I have learned that visibility sometimes does mean exclusion and judgment. I am tired of having my pursuit of employment and education compromised by a seemingly never-ending need to defend my rights. I am tired of being excluded because I am a woman with a disability.

I am tired of being the one left standing alone on the playground. And, I'll still be here tomorrow—fighting for the right to be in the game.

Mary Runté is currently completing her MBA and working full-time at home looking after her new daughter, Tigana. She plans to get her PhD, teach, and do research in the field.

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