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Counteracting Social Exclusion of Disabled Women in the Opinions and Assessments of Expert Milieus

Abstract

In the article I have presented the opinions and assessments of experts/ practitioners working with handicapped people on the causes, fields of social exclusion, factors facilitating and impeding their social inclusion. The research described in the text presents a short report on the research conducted by me in 2010, which will be published in the book entitled *Danger of the Social Exclusion of Disabled Women*.

Key words: *marginalization, social exclusion, discrimination, causes of exclusion, social inclusion, disabled women, experts, practitioners.*

Introduction

Disabled women constitute a category of handicapped people whose social situation is particularly difficult. The difficulties that handicapped women encounter have different causes and result from social roles which are stereotypically assigned to them. They experience various forms of discrimination (due to their disability and their sex). Social, psychological, communication, educational, transport, architectural, spatial, institutional and other barriers, which they encounter in their social functioning in everyday and professional life, are of significance here. The aim of treating them as women often justifies the applied discrimination actions and behaviors. It is commonly believed that they cannot fulfill the female roles and they are allowed to function within the identity of a disabled person, which is not

conducive to satisfying the needs and restricts or hinders them to use the rights to which they are entitled.

The aim of the article is to present opinions of experts/ practitioners concerning the causes, fields of social exclusion of women with disabilities, the factors conditioning them and actions which are conducive to their social exclusion. The way of perceiving the needs, discerning the possibilities and restrictions of handicapped women exerts an impact on the mutual relationships between the disabled people and practitioners working with them, underlies the actions conducted by them, but also outlines the direction in various solutions taken up in relation to them.

The discernment of opinions and assessments of experts on the issue of the social and legal exclusion of disabled women, factors hindering and facilitating their social inclusion and possibilities to take up actions by various entities and institutions in favor of incorporating them in the social life seems valuable from the cognitive point of view.

An expert interview was applied in the research. The research comprised 41 practitioners, including social employees, teachers, trainers of occupational therapy workshops, caretakers of people with disabilities in nursing homes, guidance counselors, two municipal representatives dealing with disabled people, two directors of nursing homes and the director of the municipal social welfare center, heads of the regional societies of the Polish Association of the Blind. All the participants have long-term professional experience in working with handicapped people with different types and degrees of disability (the longest seniority is 36 years, the shortest 2 years).

Report on the research

The surveyed people pointed out that among the causes hindering the social functioning of handicapped women there were: their psycho-physical features (depending on the type and degree of disability), a delicate emotional-psychological structure of these women, weak community life skills, improper image of self, lack of acceptance of oneself and one's own disability. Experts also noticed external causes such as: negative attitudes towards handicapped women, stereotypes, prejudice, underestimation of their competence and skills, architectural, spatial and communication barriers, their isolation from society caused by being placed in nursing homes, lack of public awareness of their problems. Negative attitudes, according to experts, are manifested in miscellaneous ways in all the

three dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioral ones, in which they occur most frequently.

When the interviewed people were asked about the fields of life in which disabled women were exposed to social exclusion, they most frequently indicated the productivity sphere (their more difficult situation on the labor market than that of disabled men, especially on the open labor market), the sphere of consumerism (access to consumer goods), the social sphere (access to medical care, specialist doctors), the cultural sphere (architectural and mental barriers in cultural institutions), the sphere of politics (access to active participation in political life).

Sex and disability, in the opinion of the interviewed people magnify the problems of handicapped girls and women and if the disability is visible, it discourages contacts with such people in the professional, social and intimate sphere.

Disabled women are perceived as asexual. Such women are deprived of the right to be a wife or a mother and all needs in the range of their sexuality are still a taboo topic. They are deprived of the possibility to fulfill social roles from the point of view of sex. They have no chance to fulfill themselves in these roles because they are not given the chance. It sometimes happens that even if they acquire education, they are deprived of the possibility to live independently. From the point of view of professional usefulness, they are perceived as worse than non-disabled women, who have lower educational qualifications and who are definitely less proficient. A lot of women with disabilities live with their families, they are professionally passive and they are completely dependent on the members of the families, not only from the financial point of view.

Interview with an employee of the district disability evaluation board

The link of disability with sex increases the negative social attitudes, people think that apart from being handicapped, she is additionally a woman – she is not attractive, she cannot fulfill any role even as a woman, a wife, a mother.

Interview with the director of the social welfare center supervising nursing homes for the disabled

I think that disability still arouses fear and misunderstanding. It is even more difficult for disabled women to cope with the feminine ideal promoted in the media, which may cause them to withdraw from social life. However, the lack of acceptance is the key issue. Labeling and not differentiating the types or degrees of disability, perceiving all handicapped women as a homogenous group is also a problem.

Interview with the head of the occupational therapy division of the nursing home for people with eye injuries

Handicapped women are excluded from the so-called male-female relations. I suppose it is due to the fear that they are not able to fulfill maternity duties and that is why they are perceived as inferior.

Interview with the representative of the municipal office dealing with the issues of handicapped people

According to the interviewed people, the reasons for social exclusion are connected with the restricted possibilities of handicapped women and the maladjusted social conditions in relation to their needs and possibilities. The interviewed people pointed out that there was a low social awareness of the problems concerning handicapped women, there were negative stereotypes and prejudice against them (conviction about their low competence and small possibilities), there were various symptoms of a lack of tolerance and acceptance, labeling and tagging and discrimination. The discrimination of handicapped women, according to experts, hinders their ability to perform social roles (maternity, partner, professional), non-disabled people distance themselves from them and depreciate their values. It assumes diverse forms: their isolation, derision, ridicule, limitation of the rights to which they are entitled.

A few of the interviewed people drew attention to institutional discrimination, which results from the actions of institutions – especially social welfare institutions, courts, schools. In the practitioners' opinions, the situation of disabled women is particularly difficult on the labor market, as they are treated in a worse way by employers, they have a smaller chance to get a job, they have impeded access to higher ranks, they have lower wages, they cannot pursue certain professions. According to the practitioners, the obstacles these women face in fulfilling their professional roles and lack of access to work spaces in state offices is the dominant form of discriminating handicapped women.

Handicapped people are excluded, because society has little knowledge of disability, their needs and potential. Handicapped people are still perceived as "different", "often inferior".

Interview with a teacher

The reason for the exclusion of handicapped women is: sex and, at the same time, disability – due to the stereotypical perception that they are incapable of living independently, thus they belong to the worse category of people, not being able to fulfill their social roles (of a wife, a mother). The actions undertaken here are often of disintegrative rather than integrative nature. Special treatment, on the one hand, favorable due to the factual limitations resulting from disability, on the other hand, exaggerated exposure of the dysfunction, which exerts an impact on the final level and comfort of the functioning of a handicapped woman in a given group and on her image in society – everyone sees, first of all, her disability and not a human being or a woman.

Interview with the director of the social welfare center supervising nursing homes for the disabled

The factors causing the exclusion of handicapped women in different spheres of life are, in the opinion of the interviewed people, varied. Their individual features (type of disability, sex, lack of or a low education, low professional qualifications, lack of motivation to work, smaller availability and efficiency, low self-esteem) and their families (overprotectiveness of parents, lack of family support, dependence on parents and the stereotype that a handicapped woman is to live with her family of origin) cause the exclusion of handicapped women from the labor market. The reason for the difficult situation of disabled women on the labor market, according to the practitioners, is the economic situation in Poland (unemployment, requirements imposed on employees, big competition, few job offers for handicapped women), social barriers and also defaults occurring in the process of the social and professional rehabilitation. According to the interviewed people, women with disabilities themselves are to blame for being excluded from family life, the reasons for this are varied but, first of all, they are connected with their apprehension and fear of being rejected, of shouldering responsibility and of coping with family duties; restrictions connected with disability, the external appearance and smaller attractiveness and lack of preparation for performing family roles, weak family ties, lack of support from family members are, in the experts' opinion, significant. Experts claim that disabled women ostracize themselves from social life, first of all, due to their appearance, complexes, shyness, low self – esteem, lack of communication skills, but they are also excluded due to mobility problems and the need to be assisted by third parties. Negative attitudes towards them and architectural, transport and financial barriers do not help handicapped women to socialize. Disabled women themselves withdraw from cultural life as they do not see any needs in this sphere, they lack mobility, they are dependent on others and they lack experience, which they should have gained

at home. Social, architectural, transport and financial barriers do not encourage women to participate in cultural life. In smaller towns and in villages there are no cultural offers adapted to the needs and possibilities of disabled people. Experts claim that in our cultural circles women with disabilities are not expected to engage in politics, as the features of handicapped women do not correspond with the image of public media people. The interviewed people emphasized the negative attitudes of the Polish towards disabled women, marked by lack of tolerance, lack of tolerance for otherness, the asexual treatment of disabled women as a homogenous group of unfit and defective citizens. It is difficult for disabled women to come to grips with the contemporary ideal of a woman, to counteract their negative social image and undermine the fact of being perceived through the prism of limitations as a uniform and homogenous group (deprived of sex and the right to independently fulfill social roles).

According to the interviewed people, it is usually the case that disabled women exclude themselves from social life for fear of being unsuccessful, due to being hampered by their deficiencies, inability to accept their own disabilities, shame and low self-esteem.

Disabled women exclude themselves from social life due to their own limitations and the “non-explored” disability issue, often due to the lack of support and possibilities, for example, to use therapeutic or psychological services.

Interview with the director of the social welfare center supervising nursing homes for the disabled

Disabled women are excluded, first of all, by employers (mainly men in the open sheltered labor market); by non-disabled people who lack the experience in communicating with the disabled and who do not understand their needs; by family members (due to mercy, shame and lack of time for the disabled person); by all those who do not give them a chance to demonstrate their abilities and who do not support them in pursuing their independence.

Disabled women are excluded by employers due to the notions concerning potential problems connected with employing a handicapped woman. Institution and office employees exclude them by not undertaking sufficient actions to promote the image of a disabled woman, limiting access to services rendered by these institutions, lack of support in local communities due to a stereotypical perception of disability. The family

members exclude them due to their own attitudes and stereotypes about playing family roles by handicapped women – fear, disbelief, overprotectiveness.

Interview with the director of the social welfare center supervising nursing homes for the disabled

The interviewed people emphasized that the real needs of women with disabilities are often not reflected in legal regulations, they have to overcome big obstacles to obtain the benefits guaranteed to them by the law, because the financial means for this purpose are limited and the procedures of applying for them are very complicated. The practitioners also remarked that disabled women had hindered access to information and legal advice. As the experts observed, there is hidden discrimination of women in the regulations (as a result of a lack of sex differentiation).

All the experts unanimously admitted that the situation of handicapped women could be changed, yet it is a long-term process and it requires the commitment of a lot of entities, institutions and people in miscellaneous actions.

Creating a positive image of disabled women facilitates their inclusion into social life, that is why social attitudes have to be changed, people must get familiar with the problems of disabled women and a lot of people must be engaged in the campaign against their discrimination.

Interview with the employee of the information center for disabled people at the district family support center.

There must be complex actions beginning with the change through education and information concerning social attitudes towards disabled women and creating their positive image as persons who are able to independently function in life and to perform social roles. It is important to expand the offer of the psychological and legal assistance, provide them with self-esteem during therapy sessions, consultancy, social work and in the course of other pedagogical and psychological interactions; enhance work on accepting their own limitations, pursue their own development. Local authorities need to undertake actions to promote disabled women as normal and rightful members of the local community.

Interview with the director of the social welfare center supervising nursing homes for the disabled

The inclusion process of women with disabilities requires, first of all, their involvement in various actions which activate them and facilitate their education and allow them to acquire new professional and social competencies. The interviewed people unanimously claimed that the most important issue is work on accepting one's own disability – one's own limitations, gaining education by disabled women, acquiring new competencies and skills, their own activity and motivation to act. It is indispensable to expand the offer of psychological, legal support for disabled women and to support them in strengthening their self-esteem within pedagogical and psychological interactions. The attitude of the environment should be positive for miscellaneous social initiatives integrating and activating disabled women. The state is to play a dominant role in supporting disabled women against discrimination, because it has the responsibility for passing legislative actions in favor of the legal protection of women with disabilities, say the experts. The local self-government, according to the practitioners, is responsible for the development and functioning of the institutional infrastructure and is obliged to provide disabled women with adequate access to it.

The needs of disabled people should be discerned at each borough level (especially the situation of women and children), the needs have to be determined and then adequate activation programs with the participation of families, non-governmental organizations and associations of disabled people are to be assigned to them. The task of the media is to promote initiatives, projects, actions in favor of women with disabilities in order to change the social attitudes towards them. The role of experts is to conduct examinations and analyses in order to identify the real needs of disabled women, work out strategies to act and submit them to social politicians in order to take up adequate actions at the local, regional, and state levels.

The role of the legislation is to improve the legal regulations and encourage employment of disabled women and improve their material and economic situation and thus the quality of their life.

Summary

The interviewed practitioners identified miscellaneous factors which exclude disabled women – they can be divided into primary and secondary ones. The primary factors are the limited ability of disabled women to carry out tasks and the exaggerated exposure of their limitations and dysfunctions; the secondary factors are negative social attitudes towards them, first of all, perceiving them in a stereo-

typical way (as if deprived of sex, asexual, without the right to perform social roles in an independent way), which limits or hinders access of disabled women to a lot of spheres of social functioning. The area in which the social exclusion of women with disabilities most often takes place is the labor market, on which different discriminatory practices commonly occur.

The proposals of the interviewed people concerning inclusion actions in favor of disabled women referred to various entities – institutions and people. The interviewed people addressed most of the proposals to state authorities and regional administration bodies.

Positive attitudes towards women with disabilities, the elimination of stereotypical perceptions, viewing them through the prism of their possibilities and not limitations, facilitate their social inclusion. It is necessary to consider the needs of disabled women in different strategies and actions at the local, regional, national and international levels and also to maintain the principle of equality of chances between disabled men and women.