
THE CURBED GLASS CEILING

A Call to Action to Improve Economic Stability for
Women with Disabilities in Canada

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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AUGUST 15, 2017

Our friendship began eighteen years ago, when we met as single mothers and post-secondary students, bonding in our vision of a future that we, our neurodiverse daughters, and all Canadians could navigate. We have over four decades of combined personal and professional experience in mental health and developmental services. One of us lives with a diagnosis of Schizoaffective Disorder (a combination of Schizophrenia and Bipolar Disorder), and the other with a formal diagnosis of Autism. Our education and experience offer a unique lens on solutions for creating a sustainable economic plan for all persons who identify as women in Canada, and ultimately benefitting all Canadians.

It has been 100 years since women in Canada won the right to vote, and today we celebrate a gender balanced cabinet: a significant triumph towards a more equitable Canada. But not all Canadian women were represented a century ago, and many continue to be barred from meaningful participation and integration in society. Persons living with mental disabilities in Canada were not allowed to vote until 1993.¹ It was not until 2012 that the Supreme Court of Canada deemed persons living with disabilities “persons under the law.”²

We ignore women living with disabilities to the detriment of us all. In 2012, 3.8 million Canadians reported living with a disability.³ Only 61.3% of disabled women participated in the workforce,⁴ and their earnings were less than half of those earned by non-disabled men.⁵ Persons living with disabilities and their children are twice as likely to live below the poverty line.⁶ Most persons who identify as living with a disability will also experience a

¹ (Elections Canada 2007)

² (Goar 2012)

³ (Burlock 2017)

⁴ Ibid

⁵ (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2006)

⁶ (Crawford 2013)

secondary mental health issue⁷, and one in two Canadians, regardless of disability, will experience a mental health crisis by the time they reach their forties.⁸

The direct cost of mental health care alone in Canada is an estimated \$50 billion annually, not including \$6.4 billion in lost productivity and an opportunity cost to caregivers (most of whom are women) of \$14.9 billion. The annual cost of direct mental health care in Canada is expected to reach \$80 billion by 2021.⁹

History teaches that women and men are expected to exist within a well-defined classification system of “us vs them.” Universalism and the search for a common set of human values is often used as a thinly veiled attempt to dominate and subjugate anyone who does not subscribe to Eurocentric norms, which are, in truth, the values of a small minority who control most of the resources. Unless one fits this Eurocentric, ablest view of what is normal and right, one is labelled unfit or broken, in need of intervention and cure, or marginalized from mainstream society.

This ideology has been used as justification for numerous injustices that continue to be perpetrated, causing intergenerational trauma, across the continent: from violation of all gender rights, to residential schools, to the “Sixties Scoop,” to forced sterilization of disabled women, to the failures of the institutional cycle and “conversion therapies.” This prevailing attitude of “father knows best” informs social policy regarding disabilities and women’s issues alike. It is based on inaccurate and damaging stereotypes, which are then perpetuated and accepted by society at large.

⁷ (World Health Organization 2016)

⁸ (Mental Health Commission of Canada 2017)

⁹ Ibid

Self-determination has become an important issue within both the medical and social models of disability.¹⁰ Consultation primarily with those whose knowledge and experience of disability is second-hand, such as parents, clinicians, researchers, caregivers, and other “experts,” condemns persons with disabilities to mere spectatorship in their own lives and almost certain onset of secondary mental health issues. It is the same paternalistic thinking that says, “I know what is best for you,” and dismisses the expertise and opportunity to empower those who must live with the consequences of what are frequently disastrous interventions. Worse, it bars us from meaningful participation, re-enforces compliance, and thus increases our vulnerability.

This is a call to action for Canada to take a stronger leadership position globally in the third wave civil rights movement towards economic stability for all Canadians who identify as women. The full scope of disabled women’s needs is already well documented, well established, and beyond the limits of this brief. Here, we identify four main priorities that could immediately improve the economic outlook not only for women in Canada, but for persons with disabilities around the world.

Recommendations

1. Canada must commit to the timely accession of the Optional Protocol (OP-CRPD) and uphold the UN Declaration of Rights of Persons Living with Disabilities.¹¹ Persons living with disabilities is the fastest growing minority in Canada and globally; infrastructure must be put in place to shape innovation, economic sustainability, and best practices as human rights leaders. The Canadian Human Rights Commission reports that almost 50% of discrimination complaints filed in Canada involved persons with disabilities.¹² Article 27 of the UN Declaration affirms the rights of persons living with disabilities to work and

¹⁰ (Vanmala Hiranandani 2005)

¹¹ (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 2007)

¹² (Canadian Human Rights Commission 2015)

earn a living, prohibits discrimination in employment, promotes self-employment, encourages hiring and accessibility, and calls for workplace accommodations.¹³

2. Canada must commit to including protection of job security for Canadian women living with disabilities when renegotiating NAFTA and targeted recruitment of foreign temporary and skilled workers. According to the Canadian Accessibility government website, approximately 411,600 working-aged Canadians with disabilities are not working but their disability does not prevent them from doing so. Almost half of these potential workers are post-secondary graduates.¹⁴ The Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) and Express Entry Immigration programs, for example, must consider Canadians living with disabilities as viable labour resources prior to approving a positive LMIA and recruiting foreign nationals.
3. Going forward, Canada must fund only research and treatments that improve disability data, diagnostics, and access to self-directed supports that preserve the rights of all citizens to their identity and culture. Research and resources for disabilities have predominantly been allocated to white, heterosexual males based on the Western medical model of disability, which is inherently flawed.¹⁵
4. Canada must invest in targeted, specific policies and initiatives for the economic empowerment of women and girls living with disabilities. We will not achieve the UN #Envision2030 Goal of Gender Equality unless we act now. For example, the Status of Women Committee must call for and provide more funding for projects like the UN's "I Am (Wo)man" campaign.¹⁶ In 2017, Employment and Social Development Canada announced the creation of new Workforce Development Agreements that no longer specifically target persons with disabilities, representing a step backward in our social and economic development.¹⁷ The federal government needs to take a stronger

¹³ (United Nations 2007)

¹⁴ (Employment and Social Development Canada 2016)

¹⁵ (Crasnow 2015)

¹⁶ (UN Women 2015)

¹⁷ (Employment and Social Development Canada 2016)

leadership role in working with the provinces, territories, professional development associations, and most importantly the Canadian disability community, to ensure funding for employment programs that lead to gainful, sustainable employment. Job coaches and sheltered work programs do not lead to long-term employment success; most women living with disabilities do not qualify, and those who do qualify have no improvement in long-term outcomes.¹⁸ Employers and future leaders must be educated regarding inclusive employment, duty of care, prevention of occupational workplace injuries, and the provision of workplace accommodations.

The unemployment rate among Canadian women with disabilities is 13.4%, compared with the national average of 5.6%. Women whose disabilities are considered severe have an unemployment rate of up to 53.7%. Women with disabilities who do find employment earn 57% less than able-bodied men.¹⁹

If the recommendations proposed herein were implemented and even 10% of Canadian women of the 13.4% who live with disabilities were able to gain successful, sustainable employment with accommodations, and earned the current median income of \$50,888, it would bring into the economy approximately \$1.6 billion and potentially save our economy \$7.1 billion in mental health, productivity and caregiver opportunity costs. These figures are modest, excluding the impact on health-related quality of life, savings to the legal system and law enforcement, and intergenerational benefits that would result. Adopting these measures could benefit all Canadian persons with disabilities, advancing economic security for all women in Canada.

¹⁸ (Picard 2015)

¹⁹ (Statistics Canada 2015)

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