

Female living conditions and disability : Brief research report

Schildmann, Ulrike

1984

<https://doi.org/10.25595/380>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schildmann, Ulrike: *Female living conditions and disability : Brief research report*, in: International Journal of Rehabilitation Research, Jg. 7 (1984) Nr: 3, 324-326. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25595/380>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY 4.0 Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY 4.0 License (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>

Ulrike Schildmann

Female living conditions and disability

Brief research report – *Int. J. Rehab. Research*, 1984, 7 (3), 324–326.

This research project was concerned with an analysis of the living conditions of handicapped women. The analysis of existing data was followed by an empirical investigation and critical evaluation.

1. Problem, objective and basic premises

The theoretical background of this research was founded in the analysis of the basic structures of women's living conditions in modern industrialized societies. These structures concern women's work as housewives and employees in the labour-market. These social structures as well as social demands perpetuate a particular „female normality“ which is differing from the „male normality“ (Chesler, 1972).

If a woman is *not able* to fulfill the socially required expectations she will be treated in a particular fashion. Should this inability be due to an accident or illness I characterize it as *disability* in the medical sense of the term. For analytic purposes I am distinguishing between „disability“ and „handicap“.

The extent to which the deviance is countered with control, sanctions or even punishment depends upon whether the woman was ever able to fulfill social norms and/or whether she will be able to fulfill them in the future. It is also contingent upon the causes of this illness or accident having resulted in a disability and upon the social acceptance of this particular impairment.

Sanctions, controls and special programmes aim at reintegrating the woman into her previous life context. If such is not feasible, they intend to establish a new, socially controlled, way of life for her which (under the most estranged circumstances) may lead to an institutionalization of the woman. These means of control create the most significant *handicap* – in the *social sense* of the context. Handicap is thus defined as the process of isolation from „normal“ life.

In reality, medical and social aspects of disability/handicap are intertwined.

In capitalism, handicap is conclusively defined as „labour-power of lower quality“ (Jantzen, 1979). Men exert their labour-power in the labour-market. Women, however, work in the *private sphere/marriage* as well as in the *labour-market*.

Handicap thus implies two meanings: on the one hand it denotes the exceptional behaviour which so-called normal people, professionals and institutions exhibit towards persons who do not fulfill social norms. On the other hand it designates the restricted ways of life these persons are required to live and their specific reactions to this life-style.

In my analysis of female living conditions and disability I concentrated on the situation of handicapped women in both spheres of women's work: in the household and in employment.

The following questions were central to my analysis:

- *What kind of work are disabled woman capable of doing in the home and in the labour-market? In which ways are disabled women limited in their possibilities to work?*
- *How are these women perceived by potential husbands and employers, and which additional handicaps are imposed on disabled women by these men?*
- *What are the consequences of the inability of these women to fulfill the social expectations of normality?*
- *How do women deal with these problems? How can they fight social discrimination?*

2. Methodology

The first step of the analysis consisted in evaluating existing data and interpretations of the social situation of handicapped women living in West-Germany and West-Berlin, i. e.

- data on the number of handicapped women, compared to non-handicapped women and to handicapped men;
- data on handicapped women in the labour-market and in courses for vocational rehabilitation, as well as
- data and descriptions of handicapped women concerning their specific problems in marriage and housewifery.

Since most of the data I found were not appropriate for the analysis of the women's living conditions, I subsequently decided on interviewing 50 handicapped women. The sample was selected among the 250 women registered with the Employment Office of Bremen in the autumn of 1978. I used an open ended questionnaire. The results of the interviews were analysed.

The third step of analysis consisted in comparing existing data and interpretations with the results of the interviews I conducted.

3. Selected results and discussion

Between 6 and 10 percent of the population of West-Germany and West-Berlin are classified as disabled persons. At present, 40 to 50 percent of these are female.

3.1 Handicapped women as housewives

Generally speaking, twice as many disabled women as non-disabled women are unmarried. Comparing these data with the figures on disabled men, a remarking difference is apparent: a much larger percentage of disabled men is married.

Among the 50 women interviewed 24 were married. Of these 24 women, 16 had married before their disability developed. Their husbands had thus married healthy, so-called normal women. Those women who at the time of the interview were single expressed their concern about not being accepted as women-lovers-wives by potential husbands.

On being asked whether their disabilities limited their work in the household 80 percent of the sample answered in the positive. Most of the married women had to push their husbands, more or less directly, to participate in the chores. More often these women received help from their mothers, sisters, women-friends.

While admitting their problems with carrying out chores many of these women emphasized their competence and qualifications for housewifery. They received their sense of self-value from being able to do so.

3.2 Handicapped women in the labour-market

According to a representative survey on disabled persons in West-Germany of 1976 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 1978) about 40 percent of the disabled men were employed in the labour-market, and only about 15 percent of the disabled women were employed outside the home.

The West-German social system for vocational rehabilitation of handicapped people does not offset the discrimination of handicapped women in the labour-market:

Among all participants in rehabilitation centers for adults (Berufsförderungswerke) only about 10 percent are female. While the ratio of boys to girls in the schools for the handicapped is about 60 to 40, 80 percent of the participants in the rehabilitation centers for handicapped adolescents (Berufsbildungswerke) are boys, and only 20 percent are girls.

In the „sheltered“ workplaces the ratio of men to women is about 60 to 40.

These figures document the existing hierarchy within the system of programmes designed for the handicapped. Women are represented best when the least amount of qualifications is required.

Of the 50 women interviewed 38 were unemployed at the time. Unemployment had lasted up to one year for 50 percent of these women, up to two years for 25 percent, and another 25 percent had been unemployed up to four years. This is proof of the gloomy prospects handicapped women face in the labour-market.

Compared with the price index, in most cases the unemployment compensation was rather low so that the women felt the necessity to find a new job. At the same time they had experienced how difficult this would be. Half of the women interviewed had never had qualified job training.

Contrary to social policy goals, many of the women found that holding an identification card for disabled persons did not turn out to be advantageous in the labour-market, but rather disadvantageous.

Confronted with their restricted chances in the labour-market the women found themselves in economical insecurity and were laden with several fears, fear of poverty, of dependence on social welfare and of their impending old age.

3.3 The psycho-social situation of handicapped women

How do handicapped women cope with the stress exerted by the predominance of social normality and with the social rejection they experience? Do they receive psychosocial support?

Concerning professional help the women emphasized that they would like to get more psycho-social help from their physicians. They wished to share their problems resulting from physical difficulties decisively influencing their lives.

I also asked the women whether they had ever consulted a psychologist or a psychotherapist? Only three of them had seen one. The women discussed most of their concerns with family members, relatives and friends (mainly other women). But almost half of the 50 women said that they did not feel comfortable talking about their problems. They were fearing or had experienced discrimination on being outspoken.

Group activities, such as women's groups or groups for handicapped women and men, were attractive to 30 of the 50 women, yet they were uncertain on how to become actively involved. The expressed interest in participation can be regarded as a reflection of the social discrimination these women have experienced as well as a sign of hope for fighting this very discrimination.

4-References

- Chesler, Ph. *Women and madness*. London: Allen Lane, 1972.
- Jantzen, W. A marxist view of disability. In The Teacher Collective, Department of Special Education (Ed.), *Alternative Concepts of Disability and the Implications for College and University Programmes in Special Education*, Lillehammer/Norway, 1979.
- Schildmann, U. *Lebensbedingungen behinderter Frauen*, Gießen, Focus, 1983.
- Statistisches Bundesamt Wiesbaden. Körperlich, geistig und seelisch behinderte Personen. Ergebnis des Mikrozensus Mai 1976. *Wirtschaft und Statistik*, 1978, 491-496.
- Author's address: Dr. Ulrike Schildmann, Bundesallee 19, 1000 Berlin 15, Fed. Rep. of Germany.