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Discussion Paper No. 35
ISSN -0314-6006

January 1979.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH VI - THE DISABLED WOMAN WORKER - PART 11.

Part 1 of this paper considered the special problems of women and rehabilitation, especially after industrial accidents. Part 11 examines the employment situation for handicapped women and for women with handicapped children.

EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS OF HANDICAPPED WOMEN.

The education provided for handicapped children in Special Schools gives rise to later employment problems. There is a tendency to over-protect the handicapped and to assume that they will spend their whole lives within the shelters provided for them. Ann Deveson (1) says:

"Handicapped people are devalued, underestimated and underchallenged. So they are over protected and, in a number of cases, end up in a situation where the rights of the handicapped person are completely overlooked."

It is now suggested that the sheltered environment provided in Special Schools could be detrimental to the child's ability to adjust to the wider society. It is frequently found that children leaving these schools have been so removed from the competitive real world "out there" that adjustment to employment can be a very difficult step.

The educational opportunities available in Special Schools is very restrictive in terms of later employment opportunities. High school subjects are often only available through correspondence courses and maths and sciences are largely neglected. This makes access to tertiary courses very limited. Most girls are channelled into office work where more thorough training is provided. The fact that technological change is rapidly diminishing the number of positions available in office work is ignored.

The range of unskilled positions open to handicapped women is small because much of this unskilled work requires a great deal of physical mobility - cleaning, production-line work and shop assistant work are all very strenuous and physically demanding.

Special Schools put different expectations on girls and boys regarding future employment and independence. Handicapped boys are expected to work towards becoming self-supporting and are more likely to be encouraged to continue their education. However it is assumed that girls will remain within the protection of their families and so they are offered less opportunities. This attitude affects the girl's own identity and ambition. One woman contemplating tertiary education was actively discouraged by professional helpers on the grounds that it was unnecessary because her family would look after her. No thought was given to her need for independence or to the fact that her family might not always be able to provide for her. She was told that there would be excessive difficulties to overcome and that it would be better not to try. She found this passive, non-challenging attitude was commonly fostered among the handicapped, especially women, and that it led to a withdrawal from many endeavours.

Even when there is a general labour shortage the handicapped face many barriers to employment. When unemployment increases the handicapped, especially women are often the first to be retrenched and the last to be employed. Joan Ford states: (2)

"In times of full employment, those in the 'difficult to employ' category have greater chances of employment. But in the present unemployment situation those in this group are increasingly the leaders of the hard-core unemployable - together with an increasing percentage of unskilled, less skilled youth, recently arrived unskilled immigrants and some women. Increasingly the Australian society is being divided in terms of employment/unemployment."

When trying to obtain employment in the community the handicapped person is faced with the problem that, because her/his physical appearance is different, she is often assumed to be mentally handicapped as well. This attitude may reinforce, in the handicapped themselves, a negative and inferior self-image. The physically disabled individual who is employed and who finds acceptance among other fellow workers begins to lose her feelings of embarrassment and unworthiness. She is more independent than those who are not employed. (3)

Handicapped people in the workforce are further disadvantaged because they are restricted from superannuation on the ground that they will be a drain on the funds.

In those firms and institutions which do employ handicapped people it is usually found that they employ more handicapped men than women. This is probably a reflection of men's expectations and drive to enter the workforce plus the societal value that a man has to work while it is only of secondary importance to a woman. Given that handicapped women are often less likely to marry and that they have greater expenses (in the form of doctors' bills, medication, transport, equipment etc.) than unhandicapped people, it can hardly be maintained that employment is unimportant to them. It could be the only means of protecting them from extreme poverty.

There is obviously a need for affirmative action programs to facilitate employment opportunities for handicapped women. One of the most important needs would be met with the introduction of permanent part-time work. This would allow handicapped women to work the number of hours and at the time of day which suits the demands of the handicap without being deprived of sick leave, holiday pay and job security.

Currently handicapped people wishing to work have two options open to them:

- i. to accept that hours of work offered will not match their physical or mental or emotional limitations and therefore accept that they cannot work. They then face a life-style based on welfare benefits, living on the poverty line with the corresponding lack of status, identity and participation in the mainstream of society;

or

- ii. the disabled can work fulltime with the consequent toll on their physical and emotional condition and the corresponding effect on personal relationships and the quality of work performed. (4)

"Permanent part-time work would be a highly desirable option for the disabled as it would enable them to match their physical or mental limitations with their psychological and social needs to participate in the work-based society." (5)

Affirmative action programs for the handicapped are one aspect of United States legislation to prevent discrimination against the handicapped in employment. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires Federal Government Contractors and Sub-contractors (approximately 400,000 businesses) to eliminate discrimination in the areas of employment, job assignments, promotions, transfers training, termination, accessibility and working conditions; and to develop affirmative action programs in the hiring and promotion of handicapped workers.

By June 1978, in the area of affirmative action programs for women and minorities alone, 17 major contractors and sub-contractors had been debarred and in the area of the employment of the handicapped the Department of Labour had awarded some \$300,000 to handicapped complainants. (6)

Another form of affirmative action is to remove architectural barriers which impede the access and navigability of both male and female handicapped workers.

Some employees are reluctant to employ handicapped workers, fearing they are less productive and have higher absentee and injury rates. A number of studies (7), however, have found that handicapped workers perform as well as or better than regular employees and have average or better attendance records. Still some employers, knowing the handicapped have great difficulty finding employment, regard them as a source of 'cheap labour' to perform only menial tasks.

EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS OF WOMEN WITH HANDICAPPED CHILDREN.

Mothers of handicapped children have to cope with such a load of extra responsibilities that few are able to take a full-time job. The extra demands of these children are beyond the capacity of ordinary child-minding facilities and require expensive special care. Thus only well-educated or professional women could hope to earn enough to pay for the care the children would need while their mothers were at work.

Because men are accustomed to leaving the care of children to their wives they seldom share or even recognize the extra burden carried by their wives. In fact quite a number resent the extra attention devoted to the child and marriages frequently break up under the strain. These mothers need very much to get away from their children at times. Isolation is a very common problem among them.

"The more removed her problem is from common experience or from other people's capacity to project into it, then the more isolated she becomes - isolated from practical help and from expressive support. The experience of isolation, which may not necessarily be physical, has a particularly detrimental effect on anyone's capacity to manage their difficulties. Yet it is usually the people with greatest difficulties who suffer most from their unsought isolation." (8)

The children also suffer from this isolation.

In many cases one-income families cannot afford the recurring medical expenses and expensive special equipment required for a handicapped child. The mother is caught in a Catch-22 situation. She must earn extra money but she cannot afford to have her child cared for while she is at work. For the woman who has had little education or training and is married to a man on a low income there are only two main alternatives. She can work a night shift or she can take in piece-work at home.

Night shift work is notoriously bad for anyone's health and for a woman who has to care for a handicapped child in the day time it is almost certain to have very damaging effects.

Piecework is repetitive and badly paid and the amount of time which the woman would have to devote to her child would greatly limit her earnings or drive her to work at night when the child was asleep.

It is apparent, therefore, that women with a handicapped child who wish to work or who must work to relieve their financial burden have few viable opportunities from which to choose. It is obvious that, in order to relieve some of the pressures associated with caring for the children and to allow their mothers some freedom to work if they wish, a different approach to employment must be taken. The availability of permanent part-time work and/or flexible working hours with special leave when required is essential for the parents of handicapped children.

Conclusion

Issues which unions could tackle are:

1. Pressure on employers to change attitudes which discriminate against handicapped workers, particularly women
2. The provision of permanent part-time work
3. Positive employment discrimination for handicapped people, particularly women, to counteract the discrimination against them.

Prevention of handicaps should be of prime importance to unions. A number of areas need action:

1. Rapid settlement of workers' compensation claims and immediate provision of rehabilitation to prevent the handicap being compounded by delays in treatment.

2. Development of safety precautions to decrease the incidence of accidents on the job.
3. Worker education about occupational health hazards and the removal of these hazards which lead to long-term illnesses, eg. asbestos.
4. Education about substances used at work which cause congenital handicaps in workers' children. eg. 2,4,5-T.

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