

Sustainability, disability and women.

The following is drawn from the research and ideas used in a forthcoming book covering over 20 years working in the disability and employment field. The data is based on UK figures. These will change with time and circumstances but offer ideas for other countries.

Sustainability. (Slide 1)

Health is one of the United Nations' sustainability themes. Disability is the opposite and, however defined around the world, results from life-changing physical and/or mental conditions. Importantly, having a disability of any type is very rarely a choice.

The consequences of such life-changing conditions doesn't only impact on our own lives but also that of our families and friends, communities, the wider population and national economies. Sustainability requires good use of all resources, including human. Disability often means wasting human resources when we aren't able to fulfil our potential, earn incomes, support ourselves and our families but have to rely on others and the State.

Scale. (Slide 2)

In the UK, "working age" is approximated to people aged 16-64. A Government paper in late 2024 stated that 1-in-4 of working age people had life-changing health conditions. Of this quarter of the population, only half were working and many of those would have been in part-time, low or middle level jobs or self-employed. Alongside this large group of disabled people were all those providing informal care that limited their own work prospects.

The result is that approaching a third of working age people may not work to their full potential meaning less earned income, less taxes paid, more reliance on the State or others for financial support. Waste of those human resources in turn impacts the national economy, growth and GDP.

The good news is that it has been estimated that around a million disabled people would work if they could.

Causes. (Slide 3)

For the purpose of this diagram, those born with their disability or who acquire it during childhood are set aside. They are still an important group but represent around 1-in-10 of the overall population.

Instead, the diagram tracks the lives of the remaining large majority from birth until around age 80 or later.

Young people progress through their school days until, around age 16, they take their first important national examinations in the UK. However, by this stage, young people living in the poorest areas can be around 19 months (nearly two academic years) behind the rich kids.

The result is that those from poorer backgrounds are likely to have no or fewer academic qualifications which then limits their future educational opportunities and, in turn, their job prospects. Many may go into low or middle level occupations. Most significantly, they are also likelier to acquire health conditions.

In these poorer areas, around 1-in-4 people in their early 40s are likely to have disabilities. Many will have worked in the lower-level jobs. Some may be able to continue working but others cannot.

Meanwhile, people living in the richest areas don't reach the 1-in-4 level of disabled people in their local population until they are in their early 70s.

This is a 30-year difference in earning capacity, tax and pension contributions, fulfilment of potential and reliance on other support. High levels of disability amongst those 40-year-olds increases the risk of poverty locally. And so the cycle continues.

The World Bank also links disability with poverty while the OECD makes the link with low educational outcomes and the UN with low literacy.

Worse for Women. (Slide 4)

Women can already face challenges in their societies and circumstances simply due to their gender.

Caring responsibilities, whether for children or family members with life-changing conditions, can also limit their prospects making work more difficult, limited or impossible.

Women with their own life-changing conditions will often already have low education and come from poorer backgrounds. All these factors are likely to limit their work and income opportunities. But these women face additional challenges. For example, in the UK, there are more women with disabilities (although they may be more willing than men to acknowledge such) and some women gain their conditions due to physical or sexual abuse. Women with disabilities are also more often victims of such abuse.

Overall, women can face more of life's challenges due to their own or others' disabilities with consequences for their own fulfilment, work and finances. When representing around half the population, such waste of resources damages the sustainability of our communities and countries.

Solutions.

Without a magic wand, it isn't possible to sweep away war, pestilence and poverty. Better health care would certainly help but there are some practical steps we can take to reduce the risk of disability from the outset.

1. Law. Anti-discrimination legislation can help by creating a definition of disability. But a law is only useful if it is enforced. This means across Government and all parts of the public sector, across all businesses and in other sections of our public lives. In the UK, this certainly isn't the case yet but many of us try.

2. Education. Delivery of schooling, studies, examinations and all aspects of learning need to be better tailored to the reality of the lives of local people. "Universal" structures and services seem less successful.

3. Employers. Whether public, business or voluntary sectors, employers need better understanding of disabled workers. They often have false ideas that a life-changing condition prevents us doing the job and that workplace adaptations are costly. In reality the vast majority of those changes cost nothing. Employers also need better cost/benefit analysis. They mistakenly limit recruitment, lose experienced employees, bear the cost of replacing and training others. They fail to realise the savings of disabled people's higher work retention rates and the reputational benefits of being a good inclusive employer.

4. Entrepreneurship. Self-employment and starting a business can be the only realistic alternative for those with life-changing conditions. But our governmental and commercial structures need to accommodate better the needs of this important potential workforce. Enterprise is at the heart of sustainable economies and we should encourage all these entrepreneurs.

5. Us. Every one of us can act as advocates, supporters and exemplars to create a powerhouse for changing attitudes and behaviour.

Taking action to implement these solutions has the added possibility of reducing poverty and so breaking spirals of decline, waste and unsustainability.

See 20 minutes talk at: https://youtu.be/D8r_tCpac2s?si=CG7FmiwJbuesWcRP (scroll to 1 hour 32)