

Gender employment gap narrows among people with disabilities post-COVID

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The shifting landscape of post-COVID-19 employment highlights a reduction in the gender employment gap among individuals with disabilities, a trend not observed among those without disabilities,

according to last Friday's National Trends in Disability Employment (nTIDE) Deeper Dive Lunch & Learn Webinar.

While men and [women](#) with [disabilities](#) have similar rates of employment, the data do not address whether women with disabilities in the workforce have lower-quality employment opportunities, lower wages, and undervalued positions that offer limited career advancement compared to men. Recent research from Mathematica shows that women with disabilities may be "twice marginalized" since neither disability policies nor policies to advance [gender equity](#) have recognized the unique employment barriers women with disabilities face.

nTIDE expert Megan Henly, Ph.D., research assistant professor, University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability (UNH-IOD), explained possible reasons for the noted disparity between disabled and non-disabled groups as well as the seeming equality among all disabled individuals since 2021.

"Employment patterns for people without disabilities look similar to the overall employment-to-population ratio, which has been affected similarly by historic impacts of the economy," said Dr. Henly. The gender gap between employment-to-population ratios in this group remains, with men measuring at 79.1% and women at 70.2%.

When comparing the employment-to-population ratios of people with disabilities, they are nearly identical, measuring 36.8% for men and 36.6% for women in February 2024.

"Since the COVID-19 period, the gap between men and women with disabilities has essentially closed," said Dr. Henly. Although these data haven't been analyzed in depth, Dr. Henly shared several facts about disability employment and demographic characteristics to shed light on this closure of the employment gap.

"These data reflect employment 'at all levels,' without differentiation between self-employed, part-time, and full-time positions," Dr. Henly explained. "It's well-documented that women and people with disabilities often work part-time."

There is also the relationship between industry, occupation, and accommodations. "We know that many occupations are segregated by gender, and certain industries and types of jobs may have been more accommodating in a post-COVID environment so that women with disabilities, in particular, have been able to reach parity in a way they haven't before," she added.

Additional possible contributing factors point to more women becoming disabled due to COVID-19. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, "Women were more likely than men to have reported symptoms of long COVID, which can be disabling," said Dr. Henly. "Women who would have previously been represented as non-disabled could have developed a disability, which may explain why we are seeing this trend more since the COVID-19 pandemic," she added.

The data analysis also only considered certain demographic characteristics, particularly age distribution. While the nTIDE data focuses on individuals aged 16 to 64, "It's important to acknowledge that women are overrepresented in older age groups," Dr. Henly remarked. "Because of an increased likelihood of disability onset with age, this may also be why we see comparably higher rates of disability employment for women."

Workplace barriers addressed

Kimberly Aguiard, health equity researcher at Mathematica, added valuable insights into the challenges faced by women with disabilities in the workforce during the nTIDE Deeper Dive webinar. As a blind

person, she is a member of the working disability community.

"Poorer economic prospects, higher unemployment rates, and limited access to educational and skill development opportunities contribute to the struggles faced by disabled women," Aguillard remarked. Established biases and structural barriers often relegate women with disabilities to undervalued positions with limited growth potential, she added.

Further complicating matters are the unique experiences of women with disabilities in the workforce.

"They are less likely to feel supported by their manager. They often don't feel that they have equal opportunities for advancement. Almost a quarter (of those surveyed) say that their disability has led to missing a raise or a chance to get ahead in some other way," said Aguillard.

Women with disabilities frequently encounter barriers such as lack of autonomy, microaggressions, and limited opportunities for advancement, she added. These factors, combined with the stress and bias they face, contribute to high rates of burnout and a significant proportion considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers.

"While disabled people are often forced into undervalued jobs that are deemed to be 'for disabled people,' women are also forced into undervalued jobs 'for women.' Disabled women, particularly disabled women of color, are more likely to work in lower-wage jobs, have [part-time](#) roles, and work in the service industry. These types of [employment](#) roles often completely lack autonomy and opportunities for creativity," said Aguillard.

"Pause for a moment and think about your most stifling, micromanaged work experience ever. Now imagine if you had no ladder out of that

work situation. In fact, you were made to feel lucky to have that job in the first place," Aguillard continued.

These situations show a need to better tease out the importance of creating concrete steps to establish more supportive environments for women with disabilities.

"There is hope," Aguillard asserted, adding, "First we've got to plant seeds of opportunity for women with disabilities to flourish. We need more program for disabled women to access educational opportunities and diverse fields, to get mentoring and have internships," she said.

To conclude, Aguillard posed the following points to plant seeds of opportunity within hiring organizations for women with disabilities to flourish:

- Ensure job announcements and applications remove ableist and sexist language
- implement more inclusive hiring processes
- Organizations should also provide and require training on fostering an inclusive, accessible and equitable work environment
- Establish policies to support a positive work culture
- Take decisive action when HR receives complaints about sexual harassment or other forms of sexism and ableism.

Provided by Kessler Foundation

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