

# **Masculinity with Disability in the Context of Employment and Unemployment Consequences: A Review of Theoretical Concepts and Research**

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## **Abstract**

The paper presents a review of concepts of masculinity with disability related to work, employment and unemployment problems. The authors evoke foreign and Polish research paying attention to a number of studies that have focused on the issue, exploring gender differences in the society [1]. Specifically, general definitions of masculinity within cultural contexts and masculinity with disability related to work domains are explored. The article also contains the issues connected with postsecondary education and vocational training, forms of support of employment of adults with disabilities as well as the effects of unemployment in case of males with disabilities.

**Keywords:** employment, unemployment, disability, inclusion, gender, masculinity

## **I. Introduction**

Work is often perceived as a fundamental social process and an important element of personal identity that shapes a lot of aspects of individual behavior [2, 3]. It is not surprising then that countries that ratified the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities ‘recognize the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others; [...] the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labor market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities’ as well as ‘safeguard and promote the realization of the right to work [...]’ [4, p. 19]. Unfortunately, statistical data shows that adults with disabilities still encounter problems with entering the labor market and their unemployment rate is usually much higher than in case of general population. What is more, the analyses conducted in Poland – which ratified the Convention in 2012 – show that in recent years the employment rate of people with disabilities is actually fluctuating (in certain years increasing, in others – decreasing) [5, 6] which may indicate that various programs that are implemented to improve the situation do not fulfill their roles or are not effective enough [7].

## **II. Literature Review**

### *A. Masculinity within Cultural Expectations*

In society, certain personality attributes that characterize each gender are perpetuated by both close (e.g. family members, friends) and further (e.g. media, institutions) ecosystem. Through the process of socialization, even little boys are socialized to become strong breadwinners, whereas young girls internalize the assumption that femininity involves beauty, passivity, and nurturance [8]. On the other hand, Barker & Ricardo point that there are ‘indigenous definitions and versions of manhood, defined by tribal and ethnic group practices, and newer versions of manhood shaped by Islam and Christianity, and by Western influences, including

the global media' [9, p. 4]. According to Silberschmidt [10, p.7] 'masculinity may also have multiple and ambiguous meanings that may vary across cultures, and alter according to context and over time. As such, there is not one but several masculinities'. For example, Barker et al. [11] write about boys and males around the world who challenge rigid ideals of manhood and actively participate to promote social change in their households, in their communities, and through their participation in public discourse.

According to Greene, Robles & Pawlak [12] there are several universal key domains of masculinity. The authors write about five areas of masculinity that, despite the changes over the years, still constitute the core of practical definitions of masculinity. These are:

Physical dominance as expressed in strength, violence, risky behavior, and ultimately, in poorer health outcomes constitute the first important domain in which masculinities are defined

- Family formation, having children, caregiving and domestic roles constitute the second.
- Schooling and education is the third important domain in the definition of masculinity: the length of time in school, the educational experience and its relevance for future work.
- Employment – the nature of work, the extent of the commitment, the degree to which men provide for their households, and so on – is the fourth key domain for defining masculinities' [12, p.5].

Traditionally, in scientific literature [13] masculinity is connected autonomy, power, activities and such perception is reflected in the culture of most countries where males – as compared to females – are more privileged, occupy better positions in the social world and have more power to shape their lives the way they want. Acker [14] describes an interesting phenomenon that she calls the 'gendered archaeology' of organizations which offer workplaces. It privileges hegemonic masculinities and, although in western culture generally all forms of discrimination against women (or people with disabilities) are banned, certain social networks, informal practices and 'norms' can 'operate to reinforce dominant and subordinate places in the organization' [15, 434].

According to Lemon [16, p.62] male domination is defined by men's particular psychological identity, social role, place in the labor force and sense of self'. She states that 'real men' are distinguished by three characteristics:

- 'unquestionable heterosexuality,
- power over women and children in their families – a real man is expected to be the head of his household,
- ability to earn money in the public workforce and to support their families – a real man is expected to be the main provider and breadwinner' [16, pp.11-12].

Consequently, in Western culture the traditional masculine role of a breadwinner implies that social expectations of (high quality) employment refer mainly to males. Even though the attempts to provide equal opportunities for males and females in the labor market have had a long history which dates back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is obvious that we are still in the middle of the process of appreciating work of women and appreciating women at work. As a result, there is still a gap in wages and jobs availability between the two groups [17].

As for the Polish research on masculinity in general and (un)employment issues, Kotowska [18] believes that for Polish males in general the loss of their employment is usually more severe than for Polish women, which results from the nature of Polish culture. The author

writes that in Polish culture earning money for the family is still the main content of the social role of husbands and fathers. Their inability to fulfill this task leads to poor wellbeing, which is then projected onto his wife and children. According to Arendt et al. [19] for unemployed males in Poland, the most severe discomfort is the loss of the role of breadwinner, or the loss of income from work. The authors conclude that males have difficulty adapting to the new roles of unemployed males. Griffin's study of unemployed males suggested that unemployment could threaten the stability of a traditional masculine identity constructed around discourses as dry, bringing home a wage and freedom from the domestic sphere [20, p.81]. Morgan [21] also writes about the connection between prolonged unemployment as major assault on the pillars of male identity [21, p.119]. While the effects of unemployment for both sexes are multilateral, they lead, as Sadowska [22] states, to the construction of culture of unemployment. It is also important to note that in some cultures there are differences in the role of employment for males and females. For example, in traditional Chinese culture the factors that contribute to the fulfillment of an adult male role and identity include characteristics associated with work: work is perceived as 'a means to occupy time, control misbehavior, show consistency of words and deeds, and to glorify parents and ancestors [23, p.197].

*B. Males with Disabilities and (Un)Employment Rates*

As Galvin [24] states, 'to become disabled is to be relegated to a marginalized status in society'. Although in recent research within the disability field there is an increasing interest in the quality of life as an important outcome of the transition to adulthood rather than in such traditional outcomes as employment [25], a number of studies prove that employment is the means by which people obtain economic self-sufficiency, gain independence, create their social identification, personal networking, community integration [26], are offered certain social status, daily rhythms and often meaning in life [3]. Obviously, being employed is also beneficial for adults with disabilities [27, 28, 29]. For this reason preparing young people for employment after education is still perceived as the main aim of the transition by supporters and education professionals [30]. Regardless of inevitable positive influence of employment on a person's social life and economic status, the workforce participation of adults with disabilities has been intractably low worldwide [31]. As Lindsay states, 'despite common misperceptions, many people with disabilities are ready, willing and able to work, yet they are the largest source of unutilized talent in the labor force' [32 p.1340]. To give an example, in 2011 approximately 12% of population in Poland had some form of disability (among them there were 46.1% males) and out of all the people with disabilities, only 16.4% were employed and most of them were males (56.5%). Interestingly enough, although there were generally more females (53.9%) with disabilities, there were actually more males with disabilities in their productive age (58.8% compared to 41.2% in case of females) and the situation was opposite when you took into account people with disabilities who reached their retirement age (31.7% males and 68.3% females). It is also worth noting that for males with disabilities the main source of income was old-age pension (37.3%), state pension for the disabled (27.5%), employment (15%) and 10.8% were maintained by other people [33]. The above mentioned statistics from Poland are in line with research from other countries which indicate that for males with disabilities – when compared to females with disabilities – the probability of having a paid employment is higher [2]. Nonetheless, the comparison to the able-bodied shows that both males' and females' with disabilities participation in the labor

market continues to be limited [34] and they more often suffer from high rates of poverty and even when they are in paid employment, they are ghettoized into low status and low paid jobs [15].

*C. Causes and Consequences of Unemployment for Males with Disabilities*

Mlonek defines unemployment as a general state of inactivity [35, p.1] and Furmanek [36] as a failure, which affects people able to work and ready to take it, but sentenced to coercive professional inactivity, not receiving income that is the livelihood [36]. The unemployment rate for males with disabilities has deeper cultural patterns and effects. Studies which address the problems of unemployment among adults with disabilities were conducted, to give an example, by Prescott [37], Barnes [38], Maj & Maj-Resler [39], Kirenko, Sarzyńska [40], Rydzewski [41], Arendt et al. [19]. Rydzewski [41], for example, studied the reasons for the lack of interest in Polish employers to employ people with disabilities. According to the author there are the following causes of this state:

- the need to adapt the building and / or the workplace, absenteeism due to illness,
- the need to take care of other people, low-skilled persons with disabilities,
- the need to employ a doctor or nurse [41, p.269].

Other causes of unemployment of adults with disabilities of both sexes are diverse and in part they result from the legal system prevailing in Poland and the instability of the introduced legislation [42, 40, 19]. The other reasons of unemployment of adults with disabilities are related to the attitude to own employment [19, 43], sometimes their overprotective parents [40, 43]. As Taylor, McGilloway & Donnelly [44] notice, whilst some people with disabilities and their parents prefer the security and safety of conventional services based rather on activities than paid work, there are a lot of others whose needs would be better met in employment provided they acquired the appropriate skills and qualifications. Other factors of unemployment are related to the lack of suitable employment offers [43, 45], prejudices of employers [40, 41]. According to Kirenko & Sarzyńska [40] employers sometimes do not have expected level of knowledge of the legal requirements that apply to the employment of adults with disabilities. As some studies indicate, the most frequently reported barrier to successful employment of adults with disabilities in the labor market is labeling, attitudes and discrimination [46]. Therefore, it is also essential to promote social/media campaigns, e.g. documenting and showcasing success stories of people with disabilities to reduce negative perceptions about their capabilities and discrimination against them [47].

Understandably, there are also some barriers affecting employment outcomes for people with disabilities which can be categorized as personal (as opposed to environmental). They include severity of disability and employment motivation of people diagnosed as having disabilities [27]. Such causes of unemployment of adults with disabilities in Poland can also be found in their lack of or low skills, qualifications, and performance [19]. Arendt et al. [19] claim that these 'individual characteristics constitute the factor that will determine the probability of finding a group of the unemployed. The probability is the higher, the lower the level of education, and the lower the level of physical condition' [19, p. 15]. Kirenko and Sarzyńska [40] write about the phenomenon of negative consequences of unemployment appearing in a form of the construction of helplessness of adults with disabilities of both sexes. The authors believe that adults with disabilities who remain unemployed are discouraged to look for work due to lack of the desired effects during their search. The authors come to conclusion that long-term unemployment destroys the human psyche through depressed mood and the feeling

of resignation. Furthermore, unemployment decreases employees' motivation, which, as a result, is manifested in frustration [40, pp.14-15]. The authors also write that for adults with disabilities particularly acute is a long-term unemployment [40, p.14]. An interesting reason for the reluctance to undertake work by adults with disabilities, according to Maj & Maj-Resler [39], may be the loss or reduction of financial state benefits associated with an obtained annuity. Borowska-Beszta [43] called this phenomenon of constructed secondary helplessness of adults with intellectual disabilities in the generational family where parents teach adult children passivity and discourage them to become employed during extensive explanations of the whole process of losing governmental support and pension after being employed.

*D. Forms of Support of Employment of Males with Disabilities*

As adults with disabilities are marginalized from workplaces for social, economic and political reasons [15, 48] and experience great challenges integrating into the competitive workforce [34], over the years various forms of support have been developed. Their aim is to prepare people with different types of disability to work, provide and help them to maintain employment. The forms include:

- Facility-based employment/sheltered employment/segreated employment [34, 49, 50] – this form of support predated more modern forms of support (like supported employment) by several decades and for many years (in some countries up to now) has been the most popular form of employment of people with disabilities;
- Facility-based non-work services – adult day programs [49], adult training centers, day centers, day hospitals, residential units [50], sheltered workshops [23], social education centers or statutory day centers [44]. Their consumers – usually people with multiple and/or intellectual and developmental disabilities have an opportunity to develop their social, daily, artistic, and, less often, vocational skills;
- Supported employment – the support of the community rehabilitation provider / work trainer / trained 'job coach' / employment specialist – used especially for people with intellectual disability, developmental disability, autism spectrum disorder [34, 49, 51]; the positive outcomes of supported employment (such as better quality life, social inclusion, job retention, absentee rates, increased taxes, taxes paid) have been identified in various studies [see: 51, 52];
- Higher, further or vocational education or training that would develop their competencies at work, giving a chance for finding employment [50] and/or promotion and pay increases [15];
- Job placement services – research shows that job placement as service was positively associated with achieving competitive jobs [26];
- Public policies and institutional practices – e.g. legislation that would guarantee tax incentives to employers for hiring people with disabilities and for making job accommodations and accessibility changes, special minimum wage waivers for employers of persons with some types of disabilities, financial assistance to purchase adaptive technology [53].

Over a decade ago, Rusch & Braddock [49] suggested that if we are to improve the situation of adults with disabilities as far as their employment is concerned, we need to promote supported employment instead of day and sheltered programs. This requires that all students with disabilities leave high schools either competitively employed or admitted postsecondary

education program at the age of 18 which would be possible if: (1) the students completed an individualized program of employment or postsecondary education by their 18th birthday, (2) a national Web-based system to coordinate entry into employment was developed, (3) financial support through interagency partnerships was provided, and (4) guidance counseling services for the students were expanded. Also, as the authors recommend, long-term support services that would ease a successful transition to competitive employment or/and postsecondary education are required. They suggest that schools (both high and postsecondary) should find students better-paid jobs, provide workplace support, retrain when necessary, and coordinate adult services [49]. Another author, Test [52] adds that in order to increase the number of people with disabilities entering supported employment, it is necessary to teach students self-determination skills, expand the mission of programs for young adults (18-21 years of age) with disabilities (so that they managed to master academic and transition other students master by the time they finish high school at the age of 18), focus on interagency (key people, businesses and agencies working to promote successful employment) collaboration [see also: 54], improve preparation of professionals, and refocus on the positive outcomes of supported employment [52].

*E. Gender Differences in Vocational Training and Employment of Adults with Disabilities*

A number of studies that have reported on vocational training have also focused on gender differences in the area. For example, Capella [55] found that gender did not significantly influence whether a person who received vocational rehabilitation was closed successfully or not but it did influence the quality of closure. To illustrate the difference, the author stated that the odds of a 20-year-old man being placed in a high-quality job (with at least minimum wage) was 1.24 times greater than for a woman of that age when severity of disability, education level and race were equal. Interestingly enough, the difference was even greater with older clients of VR: the odds of receiving a high quality job by a 60-year-old man was 2.39 times greater than the one of a 60-year-old woman. Similarly, a study of Moore [26] indicated that males with disabilities were provided with job-placement services and received better incomes at a significantly higher proportion than women. On the other hand, however, gender was not significantly related to college and university training, business and vocational training, as well as counseling and guidance services (males and females were both successfully completed). This may suggest that although the access to various forms of support is equal for males and females with disabilities, the outcomes afterwards are better in case of males. Looking for the reasons for this state, the research indicates that this may be due to ‘gendered archeology’ of organizations [14] or gender differences in career maturity [56] or some other personal traits, like fear of competitiveness, sex norms, limited self-esteem, low motivation for leadership, external locus of control, and learned helplessness – characteristics more typical of women [8].

Also, employment goals during preparing to employment could be different for males and females. In a study of Burgstahler & Chang [57] researchers explored the differences between males and females with disabilities preparing to employment. It turned out that financial security was significantly more important to males and independent living was significantly more important to females. Another study [58] shows that benefits of internships are also different in both gender group (females responded more positively about the effect of their internships on developing the skills needed to work effectively with a supervisor). The results

prove that there are some important factors in men and women with disabilities which create their situation in the labor market.

As for the gender differences in employment within the context of disability, various studies indicate that males with disabilities are more likely to have paid employment and higher incomes than females with disabilities so the patterns are similar to those among people without disabilities [2]. Women with disabilities more often have no employment at all, usually work in lower status (less-paid, marginal, seasonal and menial) occupations, receive few or no benefits and have more limited opportunities for promotion or career [48, 47]. It is also worth noting that males more often take up jobs which are dangerous or influence their health (e.g. the work with exposure to whole-body-vibration). Such work can lead to disability [59]. There are some risk factors for disability pension in males' lives. Another thought-provoking phenomenon was described by Mik-Meyer [60] who examined how stereotypical perceptions influenced the lives of employees with a disability (cerebral palsy). The author came to conclusion that stereotypically feminized perceptions of employees with disabilities (such as weak or in need of help) are linked to the impairments of the employee rather than their biological sex or gender norms of the particular industry. The participants of the study were expected to relate to and reproduce stereotypically female behavior regardless of their biological sex. Luckily, findings of Levy et al. [61] show that stereotypes can change when employers have more experience with people with disabilities and have hired people with different dysfunctions.

### **III. Conclusion**

Traditionally, males are expected to be able to provide for their families, which usually means to be employed and receive a decent pay. Unfortunately, having a disability is often perceived as a barrier to securing and maintaining employment. It seems that – like several decades ago – also nowadays masculine adulthood is perceived as a notion closely combined with employment (as the means that allows males to gain independence and the feeling of social inclusion) and unemployment (as one of the most significant concerns of individuals deprived of work). As Kuh stated, 'Employment was the most important symbol signaling entrance into the adult world and was therefore a goal all were striving towards. Unemployment robbed the individual from successfully crossing the boundary between adolescents and adulthood and forced him/her back into a role of dependence on the adult world' [50, p. 4-5].

In turn, decent employment is a direct way to increase social inclusion and social participation of males with disabilities. Obviously, it would be impossible to identify a specific program or action that would lead to complete social inclusion of males with disabilities in the area of employment. Rather, it is important to work on the removal of barriers in employment that still 'disable' people. They include both an inaccessible built environment (including problems with accessible and convenient public transportation, spatial barriers, lack of appropriate technology that would enable or ease a person with w disability to do a certain work) and discriminatory and pejorative attitudes and practices (including such discriminatory and negative practices of employers' like: giving people with disabilities no chance to get a proper work position or to be promoted, stereotypes, stigma and misperceptions regarding accommodating people with disabilities) [15, 3, 46, 61].

For some adults with disabilities, some of the mentioned forms of support in employment (like facility-based non-work services, sheltered employment) seem to be optimal solutions

for lifetime, for most of them, however, the aim is to lead to supported and – afterwards – open employment [50], in other words integrated employment in regular work situations in the open market [61] or participation in individual integrated workplaces [62] that would match their skills and abilities.

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