



WOMEN AND DISABILITIES: ACCESS TO TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

High-level European Conference

León, 12 and 13 February 2009

It is satisfying for me to be at the closure of this Conference, which has dealt extensively with two basic subjects for the organisation I represent:

- the defence of equal rights and freedom for everybody,
- and the empowerment of women, all women, particularly those who have added difficulties in exercising their rights as citizens, as is the case of women disabilities.

Suffering any type of disability today in our society still involves a great handicap for the person in the use and enjoyment of social and economic rights.

Furthermore, even though it is true that disability affects men and women the same, society penalises disabled people more harshly if they are women.

Disability/different abilities, this should be the first point to be considered. Disability, as a synonym of inability or difference, different abilities to do things differently, at different speeds. Disability is still perceived in our society as a debit, and lack of uniformity and failure to adapt to a particular standard is in consequence punished. Whilst speeches are still made praising diversity (of colour, cultures, life styles, etc.), non-acceptance persists for everything that differs from the norm, for anything that is different.



We should understand disability, the same as gender, as a cultural construction, a social construction that evolves over time and that is the result of interaction between people with disabilities and barriers, many of them invisible, produced by negative attitudes anything different, thereby causing inequalities.

Gender, the social construction of what is understood at this moment in history to be "femininity" and "masculinity", establishes different rules of behaviour for men and women, as well as an asymmetrical division of property and resources based solely on biological differences.

The intersection of both categories, disability and gender, has produced a clear infringement of the rights of women with disabilities, checking their desires, shaping their longings, confining their possibilities, pushing them towards invisibility and, therefore, inexistence.

The difficulties that women with disabilities have to face are not in most cases the result of the degree or type of disability they suffer, but are the result of the establishment of stereotypes and social roles that determine and set out from birth what each person may or may not become. If you are a woman with a disability, the range of possibilities that society offers is practically inexistent.

Fortunately, the firm desire of women to enter all areas and levels of society is reaping dividends, and women now participate in the world of knowledge



and culture, employment and economy, as well as political and social participation. And women with disabilities too. The Women's Institute would like to join this effort.

Women with disabilities represent 46.8 %¹ of disabled people with higher education studies, obvious proof of the constant desire to improve that moves them, but this effort does not always obtain the hoped for results in the economic world and in employment.

Women with disabilities have an employment rate that is 12.5% less than men with disabilities, 21.7% of women as against 34.3% of men. The unemployment rate is 19.7% for women with disabilities, whereas men with disabilities have an unemployment rate of 12.8%, the differences again being evident.

Furthermore, those who achieve jobs very often have to face clear discrimination at work, with differences in pay, horizontal and vertical segregation, jobs not adapted to their needs.

These data, access to all educational levels and the level of integration in the employment market are a clear sign of how removed women with disabilities are from the vital opportunities that define full citizenship in current society.

¹ National Statistical Institute, August 2003, EPA (Active Population Survey). Module of disabled people and their relationship with work.



The infinite barriers that women with disabilities have to face (difficulties relating to access to resources, communication and attitude, as well as physical and architectural ones) to be first class citizens in our society are in reality an act of violence that leads them to the limit of social exclusion. What best defines social exclusion perhaps is that the people affected are not recognised as having the ability to act, to decide or to appraise by themselves.

Disability should never be assumed from vulnerability, but from the need to create a new order, a new social model that encourages and supervises the effective integration of all members of the community by assisting their active participation.

Ever since it began, the Women's Institute has seen the fight against the discrimination suffered by women with disabilities as being one of its main aims, making its reality visible, strengthening and supporting its advances, pointing out the obstacles which they still have to face today.

The policies developed by the Spanish Government have been joined to the efforts of women with disabilities to be actively present in all areas of society, the recent ratification of the convention on the rights of people with disabilities being a clear sign of this.

Full citizenship for women with disabilities involves recognising their rights as people, individuals with full freedom and equality, and not just passive



individuals, recipients of regulations and rules imposed from various bodies, but individuals with full rights, with full participation in decision making.