

Adopting a specific sociological theoretical 'lens' of your choice critically explore one of the following contemporary issues in society:

Disability, despite its definitions throughout history, is no longer considered by sociologists, to have definitive definition, that fits all individual needs. Models have been adopted throughout recent history in order to unify understanding concerning disability. For example, the social model of disability has been established, moving forward from, the medical model of disability, which by many theoretical thinkers, is considered significantly outdated. The social model proposes that disability is socially constructed and that the societal paradigm towards a person with a marginalised characteristic is what disables a person, rather than a condition or impairment (Oliver, 1983 *cited in* Swain *et al*, 2006, p. 7). With the medical model in contrary, establishing that a medical condition or an impairment is something which can be cured or treated. Furthermore, suggesting it is the medical condition that disables a person. If such a condition is cured, a person is no longer considered to be disabled (University of Leicester, 2015).

The social model of disability has been criticised, with Shakespeare (2006) expressing that, in focussing on disability solely as a societal issue, in turn disregards the personal and individual needs faced by disabled people. Other critiques adopt the view that the model ignores other protected characteristics that lead to oppression or marginalisation such as age, race, and most importantly for the purpose of this essay, gender (Swain *et al*, 2006, p.7). It's important to note that our society is not homogeneous, and neither is the disabled population. A great deal of the disabled population are women, these women are faced with two types of structural disadvantage, sexism and disablism (Swain *et al*, 2006, p. 69). Sexism being a type of discrimination or prejudice based on one's sex, typically a woman's, (Sens, 2006, p. 70) and disablism being discrimination against disabled people, on the grounds of their disability or impairment (Scope, N/D).

This essay aims to explore the idea of disablism through a feminist lens. In general Feminism, which is a conflict theory, focusses on the oppression in which women are faced with, in a world where male patriarchy dominates (DK, 2019). Feminist campaigners aim to create a better sense of social consciousness for women on the grounds of - economics, politics and in terms of social life. Through achieving this, women are offered the opportunity to live in a society where the paradigm no longer tyrannizes them (Tandoon, 2008 Pg. 2). Furthermore, offering opportunity for a better sense of equality to be achieved, with better

opportunity for women to thrive and prosper. Thus, creating a better sense of human and social capital (Bourdieu, 1992 *cited in* Giddens, 2006, p.322). Feminism, however, is a significantly complex concept, making it difficult to define (Dyer, 2016 pg. 1).

It can be considered, when studying women and disability, that the groups have much in common. Both groups are marginalised by societies oppressive structures, and being a woman, who is also disabled leaves individuals vulnerable to become doubly oppressed (Vernon, 1999 *cited in* Swain *et al*, 2006 p. 70). In recent decades, this has been recognised among academics, and consequently the two groups are beginning to be studied collectively. Although some criticise this, expressing it may marginalise their experiences further, and draw attention away from common concerns (Zarb, 2001, *cited in* Swain *et al*, 2006, p. 70). This essay aims to explore the discriminative effects of being a disabled woman in terms of sexuality, and the oppression and discrimination disabled women are faced with in regard to their basic human rights, along with violence and domestic abuse and the prevalence of such issues for disabled women, and the economic discrimination of being a in disabled women in Britain are posed with.

Regardless of the fact disabled people have equal rights regarding reproduction, sexuality and family life, their participation in sexual relationships is often frowned upon by society, with disabled women (DW) being discriminated against and considered as asexual beings. Often because of this, DW are regarded as if they are incapable of becoming mothers, having sexual relationships and therefore are infantilised and made to feel unfeminine (Addlakh *et al*, 2017). Feminist thinkers, express that denying DW of their basic human rights can only lead to further discrimination and marginalisation (Hall, 2011, p 195), also adopting the belief that sex, regardless of other marginalisation's such as disability, is a socially constructed concept, in which males can adopt ownership and power over the women, therefore making women the subordinate, DW therefore, are subordinated further (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 198).

Regarding motherhood, DW, have been particularly discriminated against, often being considered as unfit for parenthood, and consequently having their children removed by social services. Additionally, throughout history, DW have been unwilfully administrated contraception, in attempt to create barriers to pregnancy, and in extreme cases women were forcibly sterilised (Swain, 2006 p. 130).

Often in disability civil rights campaigning, issues such as education, employment, and housing are at the forefront. Sexuality and the relationships of disabled people have been

ignored or undervalued. Thus, undermining the fact that adopting a sexual identity and participating in healthy intimate relationships, adds meaning and emotional value to our lives and creates a better connection to those around you, and to the world (Shakespeare, 2000, p 165; Tepper, 2000, p 288 *cited in* Swain *et al*, 2006 p 131). With an eighty-year longitudinal study by Robert Waldinger, revealing that in the absence of healthy relationships, one's overall health and life expectancy can significantly suffer (Mineo, 2017). Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory, would agree, arguing, in order to become a self-actualised individual, with the ability to reach full potential and prosper, one must first adopt a sense of belonging, through healthy intimate relationships.

Medical model thinkers would argue however that in relation to certain disabilities, such as learning disabilities, one may lack the capacity to consent, or to make decisions regarding sexual relationships. Some individuals in these cases have little knowledge of areas such as sexual health, pregnancy and contraception. When a person participates in sexual relationships with lack of knowledge and understanding in these fields, they can be putting themselves in dangerous situations which they may not have the ability to cope with, such as unplanned pregnancy (Murphy, 2003). An enquiry by the home office proposed in the absence of understanding the implications and consequences of sexual activity, one is considered unable to consent (Home office, 2000 *cited in* Rogers, 2016).

Policies are constantly being developed in the aim of tackling and addressing these contemporary issues, working towards providing support and advice for disabled citizens, to ensure they can participate in safe, happy, healthy relationships. For example, the 'Supporting people with learning disabilities to develop sexual and romantic relationships' by the National development team for inclusion (2016), which provides disabled people and carers with information about contraception, pregnancy, dating and sexually transmitted diseases.

It's important to note, however, that although existence of such policies help to raise understanding and awareness of sexuality and for disabled people; the general societal paradigm is still predominantly pessimistic and discriminatory. It appears that, until the societal perception alters, and the stigmatic discrimination is eliminated, disabled people, especially DW, will remain socially excluded, and may lack the means necessary to gain a high sense of self (Addlakh *et al*, 2017; Crisp and Turner, 2010). Similarly, to the perception of male patriarchy and the role it plays in subordination of women in terms of sexuality (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 198); Feminist, Kelly (1998) adopts the perception that, violence

occurs as a result of power, and infliction of power and dominance upon those who appear weaker and subordinate to them.

Although research concerning the prevalence of violence and domestic abuse – direct forms of disablism - against women with disabilities is significantly limited; research available does in fact suggest, that in comparison to non-disabled adults, adults with disabilities are 1.5 times more likely to experience violence and domestic abuse, such as neglect, physical harm emotional abuse and sexual harm. In addition to this, DW are even more likely to be victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse; with male partners being the most predominant precipitators (Hughes *et al*, 2012 Chenoweth, 1996 *cited in* What Works N/D), with sexual violence against DW completely contradicting the societal paradigm which perceived disabled women as asexual beings (Addlakh *et al*, 2017). This evidence provokes questioning of the motivation behind this violence, and the risk factors DW face in relation to abuse.

Along with the barrier of double marginalisation, women with disabilities find themselves - because of physical, intellectual or emotional barriers - becoming considerably dependent on others, such as male partners. (What Works, N/D). DW in these relationships, are often significantly dependant on their partners. This dependency often causes an abuse of power and control. Feminists adopt the theoretical perception that power is the predominant motivation behind domestic abuse against women. Viewing power and control as form of patriarchal domination (Smith, 1990 *cited in* Brownridge, 2006). This power can take form of abuse, abuse unique to disabled people. For example, along with traditional forms of abuses such as physical harm or emotional abuse disabled people are often victims of discrimination and abuses such as denial of access to medication or a wheelchairs or services along with control of finances (Brownridge, 2006).

Structural functionalists in contrast, would argue that structural divisions, and subordination of marginalised groups such as women and disabled, in society exist, and are necessary for the running of society. this enables one to understand their position and understand their subordination to the hierarchy (Mooney *et al*, 2011, p 312).

DW face a plethora of barriers in seeking help, or defending themselves from such violence's and abuses, in certain instances this can be due to the nature of the disability itself, with cognitive and intellectual. Victims with these types of disability may become unable to comprehend and understand that they are being abused, with abuse often becoming normalized in long-term victims (What Works, N/D). In addition to this, those victims who to

attempt to seek help are often, scared of the repercussions by the perpetrator, may lack the social or financial capital needed in order to access services, or may experience communication and physical barriers; which can be as simple as not having access to a phone, or being unable to pay for transport to reach a service (Curry *et al*, 2001 p.60).

This evidence highlights the vital need for devisal of strategies offering safe and trustworthy networks that DW feel they can access with confidence (Council of Europe, 2003). Under the *Care Act (2014)* vulnerable adults are legally protected from abuses such as violence and neglect, which requires local authorities to support and protect known disabled victims of abuse. *The Equality Act (2010)* also seeks to ensure that one does not experience discrimination and ill-treatment as a result of protected characteristics such as gender and disability. However, this can be critiqued because in practice it still relies heavily on disabled victims reporting these crimes and accessing these services, which is often not possible (Save Lives, 2017, p. 13). Research by Disability Wales (2011) also revealed, a considerable inconsistency in adequate training and engagement by care services and conclusively a substantial lack of understanding and support available for DW who are experiencing abuse.

The societal response and perception of Domestic violence has however, throughout the past thirty years, improved tremendously. This can be perceived as a result of the Women's Aid federation which has been developed throughout the UK. Women's Aid provide refuge, safety and support for women who are victims of domestic violence; along with consulting government with policy development (Harwin, 2006, p.556). The federation also recognise the prevalence of domestic abuse and violence towards DW, and therefore provide appropriate and adequate support for these individual cases (Women's Aid, N/D). This is alongside, the *Domestic Abuse Bill* which was introduced to the Houses of Commons in July 2019, the bill sets out aims such as raising awareness of the impact of domestic violence on victims, along with improving the treatment of victims by the criminal justice system, and the services available for those affected. The bill is considered by politicians, highlighting its urgency (UK Parliament, 2019). The bill also proposes more adequate services and provision must be available for vulnerable individuals such as disabled, highlighting the significance of violence and domestic abuse against people with disabilities (Gov.UK, 2019, p. 20). The bill has not yet been implemented, however, current UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has expressed the bill will receive 'proper consideration' (Perraudin, 2019).

Wright (2016) would criticise this evaluation of abuse against DW. He argues that domestic abuse and partner violence studies focus heavily on female victim cases, which disregards the fact that men are often the victims of domestic abuse by women. This creates an assumption that women are incapable of becoming violent or abusive beings. Discrimination against DW can also have significant economic repercussions, both because of access to employment, and as a result of austerity and benefit cuts (European Parliament, 2017).

Although UK citizens are protected under a plethora of anti-discriminatory and equality legislation, it appears individuals who adopt protected characteristics and especially those who are doubly marginalised, such as DW, still appear to have a significantly less prominent presence in employment statistics. DW are also unlikely to receive equal pay to their non-disabled, or male counterparts. Feminists adopt the perception that employment and the labour market work in favour of male patriarchy; with men, throughout history, perceiving women as a threat to male employment. Therefore, structural division has worked overtime in favour of ensuring women and marginalised groups such as disabled, are employed in lower paid, and lower skilled jobs, this theory still appears to apply today in 2019 (DK, 2019). With current statistics outlining that regardless of the general, presence of DW's employment rate increasing over the past decade, and surprisingly at a faster rate than of disabled men; there is still a 25.4% gap in employment rates of DW in comparison to non-disabled women (House of Commons, 2019, p.7). With employed DW still earning approximately 11.8% less than disabled men (Women's budget group, 2018).

With employment rates of DW being significantly lower than non-disabled women, and access to employment being harder for them to obtain, many of these individuals become heavily reliant on social security benefits in order to afford basic human needs such as; water, shelter, warmth and food, so that they are able to live with dignity (Women's Budget Group, 2018; Maslow, 1943). with Frances Ryan (2015) concluding that austerity is a feminist issue, which discriminates against, and oppresses the marginalised in society. According to a report by equalities watchdog, DW have been hit the hardest by austerity and benefit cuts (Butler, 2017).

It is expected that by April 2021 DW will have lost between 16% to 24% of their net income as a result of benefit cuts and austerity, which in turn can result in an actual loss of almost eight thousand pound per year. Along with this unemployed people with disabilities, claiming job seekers allowance were fifty three times more likely than non-disabled to be sanctioned,

revealing significant discrimination and oppression towards disabled people concluding that austerity, benefit cuts and discrimination is leaving the women considerably vulnerable to falling into poverty (Women's budget group, 2018 p, 2). Frances Ryan (2019) expressing that in practice the blatant economic discrimination DW are faced with as a result of austerity, is forcing some women into sex work. Explaining the benefit system is failing to meet the needs of DW, and therefore these women are participating in sex work, because the means of income they are receiving is simply not enough to get by on, which highlights, the extent of disablism that DW face in modern society in terms of economics. It should be considered however, that due to Frances Ryan being a disabled woman herself, her work may display bias in favour of DW. On the contrary, Marxist ideology would argue, austerity is not an issue of sexism or disablism, but simply the way in which the capitalist system works to oppress those most financially unequal in society (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008 p, 869).

To conclude, the societal paradigm towards disability, since the introduction of the social model of disability, appears to have improved; with society generally displaying a better understanding of how society should perceive and treat disabled people in a more individualistic manner (Shakespeare, 2006). However, it appears regardless of this paradigm shift DW are still posed with significant oppression and discrimination, with societies oppressive structural divisions resulting in DW becoming doubly marginalised (Vernon, 1999 *cited in Swain et al*, 2006 p. 70).

In the absence of a positive shift in paradigm concerning DW and their participation in sexual relationships, it appears DW may be unable to become self-actualized individuals (Maslow, 1943). With research suggesting that participation in these relationships adds emotional value to one's life and can also have considerable health benefits and contribution to life-expectancy (Shakespeare, 2000, p 165; Tepper, 2000, p 288 *cited in Swain et al*, 2006 p 131). However, its also notable that individuals, whose who are posed with significant intellectual disabilities, may lack understanding of the implications and consequences of forming sexual relationships, and therefore can be putting themselves in dangerous and exploitive situations by participating in them.

It appears that a paradigm shift concerning the sexual participation of DW must occur. This firstly would ensure at a micro level (Bronfenbrenner,1979), DW are able given the opportunity form healthy and safe relationships, free from discrimination which can contribute to DW having a better sense of self-esteem and belonging (Maslow, 1943), along

with benefits in health, and in life expectancy (Mineo, 2017). On a macro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) better societal understanding and acceptance, it will be easier to address the complications surrounding DW and sexuality, such as capacity to consent, and absence of sexual education for vulnerable adults. Furthermore, with better understanding and normalisation of such topics, policies and procedures can be implemented to keep vulnerable women, such as those with learning disabilities, as educated and informed as possible, therefore overcoming barriers of exploitation and safety (Addlakh *et al*, 2017).

In terms of violence, it can be considered that the UK are working all the while to eradicate and provide support for victims of domestic abuse and violence. With current focus on implementation of legislation which protects victims and intends to introduce more adequate service provision for those victims who are disabled (UK Parliament, 2019). This is along with federations such as Women's aid who also work towards providing safety and refuge for victims (Women's Aid, N/D). However disabled women are still significantly more likely to experience violence than non-disabled women, or disabled men, and are also posed with significant barriers which stops them from being able to access support. Suggest in order to overcome these issues it is vital that service providers must be equipped with better training in noticing signs of abuse in vulnerable adults (Disability Wales, 2011).

In terms of economics, it is evident that DW are being seriously failed by the UK social security system and by anti-discriminatory legislation which is supposed to ensure that they have equal access to employment opportunities (DK, 2019). Evidence suggesting that DW are in such significant economic discrimination, that they are turning to sex work considerably highlights that changes must be made to ensure DW receive a suitable income both in terms of employment and in terms of benefits (Ryan, 2019).

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