



CSW 68 Gender and Poverty Brief

Disability, Poverty and Gender

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Approximately 1.3 billion individuals, roughly 16% of the world's population or 1 in 6, experience considerable disabilities. Women have a higher prevalence of disability compared to men. Estimates show that 18% of the female population has a disability compared to 14.2% of the male population. In the United States, nearly 50% of adults with disabilities are living in or near poverty levels, compared to 28% of those without disabilities.¹ Black and Indigenous people with disabilities have the highest poverty rates compared to all other people, with or without a disability.²

Poverty perpetuates a cycle of disability. Persons with disabilities are less likely to access education and employment. Thus, people with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than persons without disabilities. This inequality adds to the vulnerability to negative health outcomes for those with disabilities.

People with disabilities suffer wage discrimination. Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act permits employers certified by the U.S. Department of Labor to pay wages lower than the minimum wage to disabled employees. In 2020, disabled employees received an average of 74 cents for every dollar earned by their nondisabled counterparts. This provision reinforces that disabled workers hold less worth and rationalizes economic disparity. It establishes an unfair wage system.³

Psycho-social disabilities lack recognition. Among military personnel, women were diagnosed at more than twice the rate of men for anxiety and adjustment disorders and nearly four times the rate for personality disorders, a condition that is considered by the Defense Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs to have existed before military service and is not eligible for service-connected disability compensation.⁴

Forced sterilization is permitted in many US states. Currently, 31 states, plus Washington, DC, allow forced sterilization under certain circumstances, typically when an individual is under guardianship due to ongoing disability and the sterilization is deemed in their best interest. Two states, Alaska and North Carolina, have banned forced sterilization, while the law is ambiguous in 17 states and three territories.⁵

Dys-femicide results from obstacles to safety. Women with disabilities from various backgrounds encounter structural and gender-based violence, leading to heightened barriers to accessing education, securing employment, and receiving social support. Consequently, many of these women find themselves trapped in impoverished and unstable situations, restricting their possibilities to live in environments free from violence. The insufficiency of appropriate policies, including emergency measures, exacerbates the challenges they face regarding safety, leading to a disturbing rate of murders of women with disabilities or dys-femicide.⁶

Fast Facts

- The employment rate 2019 was less than 30% for disabled women and approximately 34% for disabled men.⁷

- In 2019, women with disabilities had a higher poverty rate compared to any other group, 24.7% (for those 25-54 years old), compared to men with disabilities (20.9%), women without a disability (9.2%), and men without a disability (6.4%).⁸
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 41.1 million disabled people in the United States in 2019 (12.7% of the total population): 21.2 million were women (51.6% of the total disabled population), and 19.9 million were men (48.4% of the entire disabled people). For the same year, the median earnings (adjusted by inflation) were \$30,193 for disabled men (\$43,568 for nondisabled men) and \$21,185 for disabled women (\$31,403 for non-disabled women), indicating a significant sex-related disparity aggravated by disability status.⁹

Recommendations

- 1) **Expand quality, affordable, and accessible housing.** Expanding weatherization assistance programs and implementing programs to assist people with disabilities with energy efficiency upgrades, such as more efficient appliances, would help reduce energy insecurity and alleviate poverty.¹⁰
- 2) **Pay a fair wage to people with disabilities** by revising the U.S. Fair Labor Standards Act, Section 14(c), which lets businesses pay people with disabilities less than the minimum wage.¹¹
- 3) **Report disability status in femicide observatories.** Disability and many other social identities, such as socioeconomic status, sexual identity, race, immigration, and citizenship status, are seldom reported in the news and thus not included in femicide observatories.

Resources

[Ending 14\(c\): Paying a Fair Wage to People with Disabilities.](#)

[Center for Research on Women with Disabilities](#)

[Income Poverty and Material Hardship Among U.S. Women with Disabilities.](#)

[World Report on Disability.](#)

[Spotlight on Women with Disabilities](#)

¹ World Health Organization 2022. *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities.*

² Mulcahy, A., et al. 2022. Gender identity, disability, and unmet healthcare needs among disabled people living in the community in the United States. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(5), 2588.

³ Altiraifi, A. 2019. *Advancing economic security for people with disabilities.* Washington, D.C. Center for American Progress.

⁴ Kime, P. 2023. *Female Soldiers Twice as Likely to Be Diagnosed with Mental Health Conditions in Theater Than Males, Study Finds.* Retrieved from military.com.

⁵ National Women's Law Center (n.d.) *Forced Sterilization Laws in Each State and Territory.* Retrieved August 2023.

⁶ Grand'Maison, V., & Lafuente, E. M. (2022). Dys-Femicide: Conceptualizing the Femicides of Women and Girls with Disabilities. *Sociation Today*, 21(1).

⁷ Office of Disability Employment Policy (2021). *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities.*

⁸ *Spotlight on Women with Disabilities.*

⁹ Hudson, Valerie et al. 2023. *Shadow CEDAW Report for the United States.* Texas A&M University Bush School of Government and Public Service.

¹⁰ Friedman, C. 2022. Unsafe temperatures, going without necessities, and unpayable bills. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 92.

¹¹ *Autistic Advocacy.*