On the Margins: disabled people's experience of employment in Donegal, West Ireland [1]

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ABSTRACT   *Traditionally, studies of disabled people's access to the labour market have been largely restricted to labour market 'censuses', often conducted by government agencies, and econometric studies. This paper explores disabled people's access to and experiences of employment in Donegal, West Ireland, using a qualitative approach. Twelve disabled people and four non-disabled helpers, divided into two focus groups, were interviewed using an in-depth, informal conversational strategy. A number of different, salient issues were identified in regards to training, and gaining and maintaining employment, ranging from ignorance and discrimination, to poor access (both workplace and transport), to legislation. Respondents identified a number or potential solutions which mainly focused around disability awareness, removing barriers to gaining employment and the implementation of stronger legislation. In the final section, the issues and solutions raised by disabled people are compared to those identified by non-disabled people, collected in a parallel study.*

Introduction: disability and employment

> *Tom:* It … boils down to getting into work, getting to where there is a job, getting to work, getting in the building, using the facilities.

> *Joe:* I lost faith with the whole process. I didn't see the point because you just meet the same old problems. That's what happens. You don't get the job because you are disabled.

The social and economic status of people is largely determined by access to the labour market and their earning potential. Exclusion from the labour market or marginalisation within it are particular mechanisms by which certain groups are excluded from prosperity and influence. Disabled people, in general, are one group that is disadvantaged through limited access to the labour market. The social and economic consequences of this exclusion are great. Berthoud *et al.* (1993) identify three main consequences of exclusion from the labour market. First, disabled people are being denied the right to work and support themselves. Despite obvious

economic consequences, this also denies access to the social experience of work and the attached social status. Where disabled people do gain access to the workplace they are often underemployed in manual, low-skilled occupations and relatively underpaid. Secondly, there are extra living costs for disabled people which have to be met either by the individual or the State. Thirdly, social security payments to support unemployed disabled people are expensive and in many cases are not adequate to maintain the basic, minimum standard of living.

These factors interact so that some commentators argue that we are witnessing a situation where unemployment and low earnings are not being sufficiently compensated for by adequate social security benefits. This is leading to widespread poverty amongst disabled people. For example, Berthoud *et al.* (1993) estimate that 50% of disabled people and their families live below the basic standard of living. Disability Awareness in Action (1995) place the figure nearer 75%. The social consequences associated with unemployment include a loss of social status, isolation, boredom, a lack of identity, and reduced self-confidence and self-respect (Lonsdale, 1990).

At present, relatively little is known about disabled peoples' access to the labour market. As a consequence, the mechanisms of marginalisation and exclusion are under-researched and under-theorised, with few studies seeking to do more than conduct labour market censuses. In the main, these 'census' studies have been carried out by government agencies. For example, questions concerning disabled people's employment in the UK can be found in the OPCS surveys of disability in Great Britain, the Employment and Handicap Survey, the General Household Survey and the Labour Force Survey (Institute for Employment Research, 1993). However, no such data exists for Ireland.

One thing is certain from these surveys, disabled people are severely under-represented in the workforce. For example, an OPCS survey in 1985 found that of the 2 million disabled people of working age (16–64) in the UK only about 700,000 (31%) were in employment and three-quarters relied on social security benefits for the majority of their income (Martin *et al.*, 1989). These rates differ for disabled men and women. Lonsdale (1990) reports that higher proportions of disabled women are unemployed, or employed in low skilled positions and earning less income, although the OPCS survey indicates that an unemployment rate of 27% for 'economically active' disabled men and 22% for disabled women. Although over double the rate for able-bodied people seeking work, these figures are not reflective of the 65% of disabled adults not in employment. This discrepancy is the result of disabled people choosing benefits over seeking employment for a variety of reasons including an acceptance of poor job opportunities and an inability to work for health reasons. With adjustment, Lonsdale (1986) estimates the true rate of unemployment for disabled people to be about 50%. Of more concern is that whilst on average 8% of non-disabled people remain unemployed over a 2-year period, 26% of disabled people remain jobless over the same time frame (Labour Force Survey, 1992). PPRU (Policy Planning Research Unit) figures for Northern Ireland paint a similar picture (Smith *et al.*, 1993): 34% of disabled adults were considered economically active, although only 25% were in paid employment. Of particular concern is that

only 7% of disabled adults were registered with the Training and Employment Agency and 40% had never heard of the disabled register. The Equal Opportunities Review (1996) reported that 1.2 million disabled people are in employment in the UK, an employment rate of 32% compared with 76% for non-disabled people. A higher proportion of these (29% compared to 22%) were working part-time. People with severe learning difficulties had the highest unemployment rate (37%) followed by those with mental health problems (33%), and those with chest and breathing problems (28%). Long-term unemployment rates were highest amongst disabled people with over half (52%) being unemployed for longer than a year. Surveys by disabled-run organisations reveal a bleaker picture. For example, a recent survey of 1000 disabled people in the Republic of Ireland found that only 15% were in employment (Irish Wheelchair Association, 1995). The problems of securing a job were highlighted by Ravaud *et al.* (1992) who found that highly qualified able-bodied applicants were 1.78 times more likely to receive a favourable response to a job application than their disabled counterparts, and modestly qualified able-bodied applicants were 3.2 times more likely to receive a positive response. Further, discrimination became more marked as company size increased.

Of those employed, many face active discrimination in relation to pay and promotion. For example, Oliver (1991) reported that disabled people work for a quarter less than their non-disabled counterparts, and Baldwin & Johnson (1994) suggest that roughly 40% of the difference in hourly rates for disabled employees was the direct result of discrimination rather than differences in job type. They suggest that in the USA this wage discrimination induced approximately 20,500 disabled people to leave the work force and cost employers $324 million in lost earnings. Moreover, Murray (1994) reports that disabled people are more likely to be employed through informal arrangements that are not covered by formal contracts and employment legislation, and that disabled people are concentrated in low-paid, semi-skilled and unskilled jobs with little prospects for promotion. Indeed, few disabled people occupy executive or management positions with the majority in low-paid, low-skilled manual work (Martin *et al.*, 1989). For example, the OCPS survey revealed that only 18% of disabled men had managerial or professional jobs compared with 28% for non-disabled men. At the other end of the employment spectrum, 63% of disabled men had manual jobs compared to 54% for their able-bodied counterparts. A similar picture is revealed for women with only 28% in non-manual jobs compared to 39% for non-disabled women. As detailed, disabled employees are much more likely to be paid a lower hourly rate than their able-bodied counterparts performing the same job. As such, disabled people are often trapped in a situation of unemployment, underemployment and poverty, and actively constitute an underclass (Oliver, 1991).

These 'counting' surveys are known to hold certain errors. For example, it is difficult to separate those who want to work from those who do not, also the permanent inability to work is a difficult concept to measure. For example, in OPCS follow-up interviews, it was found that 13% of men and 10% of women who were recorded as permanently unable to work, would be able and willing to do some part-time or sheltered work. Similarly, 19% of women who described themselves as

looking after the home/family said they were available for work (Berthoud *et al.*, 1993).

Despite there being a crude recognition that disabled people are excluded from the work place in a number of ways [e.g. open discrimination such as abuse (verbal, psychological and physical) and wage discrimination; and closet discrimination such as less job security and inaccessibility through building design and lack of transport links] there has been little research to tease out and document the specific mechanisms, structures and processes that underlie disabled peoples' access to the labour market; or how these processes interact and manifest themselves in different contexts; or an indication of the experiences of disabled people in seeking access to the workplace or their experiences within the workplace. Non-census type studies have predominantly been econometric in nature focusing on the possible models of economic demand (e.g. wages in relation to ability) and supply (e.g. disability benefits) upon disabled labour force participation (e.g. Baldwin *et al.*, 1995; Stern, 1996). More recently, Hall (1995) has started to explore contested disabled identities in the work place and the politics underlying employers conceptions of disability. The study reported here sought to redress the balance by providing a qualitative study of the experiences of disabled people in gaining and maintaining access to the workplace, the barriers to employment and the potential solutions to improve access.

Outlining the Study

The aim of the reported study was to examine disabled people's experiences of training, of seeking employment, and of being members of the workforce in Donegal, Ireland. Donegal is one of the most socially and economically isolated parts of Europe with high unemployment and a reliance on large employers such as the Fruit of the Loom for paid work. Two methods of analysis were employed. In the first instance an analysis of government policy and agency strategy towards employment was undertaken. Secondly, two sets of in-depth focus group-based, informal conversational interviews were undertaken.

Kitchin & Tate (in press) detail that an informal conversational interview is generally considered to lack any formal structure. The questions the interviewer asks are meant to emerge from the immediate context of the discussion and are asked in the natural course of conversation. Similarly, there is meant to be no predetermination of question topics or wording. With little or no direction from the interviewer the interviewees are encouraged to relate their experiences, describe events that are significant to them, and to reveal their attitudes and opinions as they see fit. The great strength of such an approach is that the interviewees can talk about any issue in any way they feel thus challenging the preconceptions of the researcher. The unstructured format allows interviewees to talk about a topic within their own 'frame of reference' and it thus provides a greater understanding of the interviewees point of view.

Focus Group A consisted of 11 people (eight disabled people, a husband, a mother and an employment-based, training project worker). Focus Group B consisted of five people (four disabled people and a care assistant). Of the 12 disabled

TABLE I. Transcription codes

(.)	RES: Yeah (.) I've done	A dot in parentheses indicates a slight pause.
( )	RES: Yeah, I've done ( )	Empty parentheses indicate that the transcriber could not hear or make out what was said.
(word)	RES: Yeah, I've done (that)	Parenthesised words are possible hearings.
(( ))	RES: Yeah, I've done ((laughs))	Double parenthesised words are author descriptions.
WORD,	RES: YEAH, I'VE DONE	Capitals indicate loud sounds.
word	RES: Yeah, *I've done*	Italics indicate a change in pitch.
<u>word</u>	RES: Yeah, <u>I've done</u>	Underlining indicates phrased that are stressed.
[	INT: Have you [ever RES: [yeah	Left bracket indicates the point at which a current speakers talk is overlapped by anothers.
=	INT: Have you ever = RES: = Yeah, I've done	Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between talk.
...	Yeah.... A while ago	Three dots indicate a section of text has been missed out.

Source: Kitchin & Tate (in press) adapted from Silverman (1993).

people interviewed, six had multiple sclerosis, one cerebral palsy, one spina bifida, one epilepsy, one rheumatoid arthritis, one spinal injury and one chronic pain. Three of the disabled respondents were in paid employment, one was at college and the others were unemployed. Each focus group discussion lasted for approximately 1 hour and 20 minutes. The study, although undertaken independently, was part of a larger Donegal Local Development Company funded project 'Contact Programme with Unemployed People'.

To allow the data to 'speak for itself' the text is generously adorned with passages from the conversations between the interviewer and the respondents. The quoted passages retain their original transcription codes to try and convey the conversational tone (see Table I). Conversations between respondents are displayed with no line-breaks between passages. All the names have been altered to protect the identities of the respondents. The data was processed and analysed using NUD-IST qualitative data analysis package.

Seeking and Undertaking Work in Ireland

There has been little published about disabled people's access to employment in the Republic of Ireland. Unlike the UK, the government fails to conduct 'census' studies or publish any statistics on the number of disabled people in work or seeking work, although figures are available for the number of disabled people dependent on social welfare. Murray (1994) reports that in 1990, 93,214 people received disability benefit (renamed sickness benefit, October 1997), invalidity pension or injury benefit in Ireland, with a further 26,000 receiving a disabled allowance (formerly Disabled Persons Maintenance Allowance; total population of Ireland approx. 3.5 million). It is therefore difficult to build a coherent picture of the number of disabled people either seeking work or in work and what type of work. It is, however, well

recognised by policy makers and analysts (see Murray, 1994) that disabled people do face greater difficulties in obtaining employment, that as a group they are more dependent upon social welfare or health allowances, and that they often have extra 'hidden' living costs associated with their impairment.

There are a number of agencies which either help to train disabled people or help them find a job. Principal amongst these is the National Rehabilitation Board (NRB). The NRB is charged with providing services to disabled people, creating disability awareness, and advising the Minister for Health, public authorities and other organisations. The NRB runs a number of services (e.g. a library and information service; resource centres) and schemes (e.g. Employment Supported Scheme (currently suspended)) which provides a shortfall payment to employers who employ disabled people who are 50–80% productive; job interview/interpreter grants; and workplace/equipment grants for employers (max. IR£3000) designed to aid disabled people find employment. There are 19 NRB centres throughout Ireland. The 1995 NRB Annual Report reports that 1121 disabled people found employment through NRB. Of these, 352 were in sheltered/supported employment. Another 550 disabled people registered with NRB participated in FASs Community Employment scheme.

The success of NRB-sponsored schemes, and other schemes such as Community Employment sponsored by FAS, is debatable. As will be discussed most schemes do not seem to lead to long-term, paid employment. NRB do not published details of the success rates for those completing schemes achieving employment, only total figures. Indeed, disabled people themselves are under no illusions as to how difficult it is to obtain well-paid, secure work and suggest that:

Sarah: it's usually disability organisations that take on disabled people.

Benefits in Ireland

In terms of benefits, the social security system is similar to the UKs. Disabled people are entitled to a level of income support usually in the form of disability allowances or health-related payments. In Ireland these consist of nine different payments: Disabled Allowance; Disablement Benefit (injury related); Sickness Benefit; Interim Sickness Benefit; Invalidity Benefit (ill-health > 12 months); Rehabilitation Training Allowance; Mobility Allowance; Motorised Transport Grant (one-off payment); and Pensions for Blind Persons (Free Legal Advice Service, 1997). At present, Disability Allowances currently set at a basic IR£72.50 per week with increases for dependants. All benefits are means tested. In addition, recipients are entitled to claim unemployment benefit if they have worked recently, paid tax contributions and are actively seeking work.

Like most recipients of social welfare the disabled people interviewed expressed concern over the levels of disability-related payments. They argued that the levels of payment whilst sufficient to keep them alive severely constrained their standard of living and restricted their social and recreational life. They felt they had been unduly treated especially when they had little opportunity to break out of the welfare system

and gain well-paid work, and had hidden costs that the government rarely accounted for. As Peter and Sarah explain:

> *Peter*: You're just on disability. That's you (.) that's you not starving (.) You might not be living very hard but you're not starving. You know?

> *Sarah*: How is anybody supposed to ((live on £70 a week)) (.) I mean if you're a single person living at home and with your parents ( ). In my case I'm living on my own and I've a house to keep, fuel to buy, electricity to pay, telephone to pay and how are you supposed to pay out of that? I think in all honesty (.) I mean the State has so much to pay out and (.) different benefits and what have you but I think the time has come when they need to sit down and work out (.) I mean, you couldn't even (.) you're talking about less than a tenner a day. If it's £70 then it's a ten pounds a day to live on…. And this is where I was talking about the hidden costs of disability. They don't take into account that if we want to go somewhere and you haven't got a car of your own you need to pay for a taxi.

Furthermore, all the respondents felt they were economically trapped into the social welfare system with little benefit to be gained from working on community-based employment or training schemes. As will be discussed, these schemes rarely lead to full-time employment with disabled people often caught in yearly cycles of disability benefits followed by training with little prospect of well-paid work:

> *Sarah*: You see even if you try and better yourself by going on a scheme, or what ever you try, they reduce your benefit … So in actual fact you're not (.) you might only be £16 better off by going on a scheme.
> *Lisbeth*: And then you get taxed.
> *Sarah*: And then you pay tax on top of everything else. So you loose your £16
> *Lisbeth*: You just go around in circles
> *Sarah*: It's catch-22 situation. And if they were to pay you your disability money and pay you your CE scheme you would still be below what they consider to be the average wage that people are earning.

These problems are known to policy analysts such as Murray (1994) who reported that allowances are currently too low and do not reflect disability-related costs; that the welfare system was too complicated and opaque, and had been created in an ad hoc fashion leading to inconsistencies; that allowances and benefits were administered by two government departments (Department of Health and Department of Social Welfare) created confusion and inconsistencies; that the systems of payment were unfair to those disabled from birth and to those giving up employment to become full-time carers; and that the system creates a cycle of dependency that is difficult to break. In the Murray (1994) study two-thirds of those interviewed claimed they did not have enough money to cover their daily living costs. However, little has been done to address these issues.

Disabled People's Experiences of Training and Employment

A Forgotten Group?

Many disabled people felt that they were a forgotten group, marginalised from society and employment, with what little attention that is paid to them serving the government's, and not disabled people's, purposes. Sarah and Peter suggested that disabled people's marginalisation is reinforced through government statistics that hide the true extent of disabled people's unemployment:

> *Sarah*: there's over 83% (.) is the last figure we got, unemployed for people with disabilities. But that doesn't appear in figures that government pro-duce because the majority of people are getting disability benefit or they are getting sickness benefit so they don't appear on the live register. So we're kind of forgotten about.
> *Peter*: its just another way of massaging the dole. Its keeping 300,000 people off the dole.

These statistics hide the true level of disabled people seeking work and provide a convenient justification for current levels of training and employment schemes. As all the respondents pointed out, receiving disability or sickness benefit does not mean that you do not want to, or cannot, work, but rather that you cannot gain access to suitable employment. Here, suitable employment refers to work that is flexible enough to accommodate people with disabilities, in terms of the number of work hours per week, and accessible in terms of getting there and building design. By hiding disabled people's desire to work the government is reinforcing notions that disabled people cannot form an effective part of the workforce. The reality, as expressed, by the respondents is that disabled people want to, and can, work and that it is society's inability to accommodate them that is preventing them from undertaking gainful employment. This process of marginalising disabled people from the workplace, of enforcing dependence through the questioning of their ability to work, however implicit or explicitly expressed, is asserted through a number of different means which Barnes (1994) refers to as 'institutionalised discrimination'.

Careers Advice

The disabled people within this study told of how they had received little in the way of careers advice, and what advice they had been given pushed them towards a range of training schemes that they might be 'eligible for', rather than schemes that they might want to do or lead to a career, as the conversation between Sarah, Peter and Joe illustrates:

> *Peter*: This is in schools like ((careers)) but it depends on the school. It doesn't continue after that. With schools it depends on the school, I mean I never received no careers when I was at school. It depends on the school.
> *Sarah*: I think the only possible thing is that if you are in and around NRB

you would discuss several things that might be available but its not careers advice as such.

Joe: They would be schemes and such.

Sarah: Yeah. Schemes that you would be eligible for. It's not careers. I don't think there's any careers, certainly not for disabled people. The only thing they will do is say 'you may be eligible for this scheme why don't you go and do that?'. Again there's no jobs.

Peter: They have a vocational officer is supposed to be trained to get people into work. It's just not worth it. The jobs aren't there.

The lack of any such advice, especially at school level, speaks volumes about the government's expectations for disabled people seeking work. However, NRB reported that 3300 disabled people had used its Occupational Guidance service in 1995, although the contents of such advice is not reported. The respondents suggested it consisted of little more than describing training schemes.

Training

Nearly all of the respondents had at some point undertaken a training scheme. Most were disillusioned with such schemes as they invariably led to unemployment and not to work. There is now a deep suspicion amongst disabled people in Donegal that training schemes are 'white elephants', designed to give the impression to disabled people that they can and will gain employment, whilst simultaneously easing society's conscience and painting the impression that the government is providing a constructive service. The respondents in the study, whilst appreciating the skills learnt, now view the schemes as essentially time fillers and social meeting places. As Andrew states:

Andrew: Well a lot of people I know, when they first get their disability, go into re-education—they learn a language, they learn computers. The problem's not with the disabled person because the person is quite willing to do that—a six month course on this or a three month course on that, it's just getting secure jobs at the end of it. We have all these complications—there's no point working hard if there is no job.

As Peter and Andrew point out, the only reason many disabled people undertake training is to do something, to remain active and social, and to avoid inactivity, and the boredom and the loneliness which accompanies isolation from the workplace.

Peter: You've got a choice between going and getting your disability cheque and you can do nothing, or you can train to get yourself skilled and into the workplace. But the help to get into the workplace isn't there. But (.) you have the choice of collecting your cheque every week or trying to do something with yourself, getting yourself on these schemes and getting trained and getting (out).

Andrew: I mean at least you wouldn't be sitting bored in the house

watching t.v. or whatever. You can only play with your computer or read a book for so long. A lot of people like to get out. The social aspect of actually working.

Furthermore, disabled people are concerned that they seem to be spending years undertaking schemes that are unrelated to previously taken schemes; that there is no rhyme or reason to the schemes they are being encouraged to undertake. As Jane, Sarah, Andrew and Tom note:

Jane: Well like, you're always training for something.

Sarah: Whereas what FAS are actually saying is 'right another six months and then we'll put you on another CE scheme' which can have absolutely nothing to do with the scheme they've already been on.... And I also think sometimes that training programs can be defeatist in that if you're not careful you can go from one training program to another training program to another training program and never get a job at the end of it.

Andrew: It's like they've been forgotten like, this training scheme ends and another one begins. People spend years and never get a job. And the scheme changes each year and might not have any relevance to the scheme the previous year.

Tom: You also have people going on training schemes they have no interest in—they only went on it because someone told them to. We're that conditioned over the years to do what we are told that when someone tells you to go and do a course—you go and do it. You may have no interest— that could cause a negative image with the employer. Government bodies tell you that 'we know what's best for you'.

The Problem with Trainers

Many of the respondents were not just critical of the courses, but also of the trainers themselves. Complaints generally related to their lack of disability awareness which manifested itself in patronising and all-knowing attitudes, misconceptions of people's capabilities, and a school-like atmosphere where the disabled person is 'talked-down to' rather than engaged. As Sarah, Joe, Lisbeth and Tom discuss:

Sarah: ... a lot of the time trainers are taken on the ability to teach but they don't know how to work with disabled people.
Joe: They treat disabled people as disabled first and not as people. You know what I mean? They need to treat us as people.
Sarah: ... trainers are not disability aware.

Lisbeth: It's not every CE scheme that you can take as well. It's got to suit you as well. You know your limits and what you can do.

Sarah: And I don't think that FAS take that into account with disabled people. ... I think also that the training people think that they are training

us for full-time jobs when a lot of disabled people are not capable of working a full week.

Tom: Well you only have to think back 10–20 years ago—especially—you were told to come in and do as you were told and don't dare question the trainer. Just be quiet, we know what's best for you.

Employers

The respondents were also critical of employers and their generally negative attitude, towards disabled people. Criticism ranged from discrimination to ignorance to fear. It was generally felt that employers had little time for disabled people and their attitudes were not helped by popular cultural representations of disabled people as under-producers; higher insurance premiums; and the costs needed to make their premises accessible. For example, Sarah, Lisbeth and Joe describe their experiences of employer ignorance and discrimination.

Sarah: Again a lot of employers kind of look at you and they'll say (.) it's kind of like 'oh, God (.) they can't, they can't give what we're looking for'. They see the chair, or they see the disability, they don't see the ability…. I think also, I think it is a fact, that sometimes disabled people can be seen as an embarrassment…. And I've heard so many people say that when you actually go in for the interview and they see you in the chair or you happen to say that you have a disability their faces change. And you (.) it's almost as if they're writing you off.

Lisbeth: And I went for interview and when it went great and I really thought I'd done okay. And when it came up to the medical I decided to tell them that I had a disability and, as soon as they found out, that was my chance gone…. I think as well that it's not just employers but people (.) they think they know what you can and can't do. They don't understand what we can do. People don't understand that there are (no jobs for us).

Joe: I tried to get a post in the (mailroom), you know like a postman, delivering stuff around the hospital (.) but I knew I could do it. But he decided to knock it on the head saying that (you haven't a clue). (I'd already been doing it like) but they didn't want to see. They didn't want you to be in the hospital. You know?

As Sarah and Tom describe, these acts of ignorance and discrimination draw upon specific ableist-based cultural representations of disabled people:

Sarah: One of the personal gripes I have is that the disabled symbol is a wheelchair. You know, for the majority of disabled people that is not the case. And I personally have a gripe about people jumping up when I enter a room and it's always, 'does she sugar type of thing', you know, or 'how is she', or 'how's she getting on'.

Tom: Well I was there recently at some training, with small employers, and they were amazed themselves that disabled people were capable of doing as much as they were. Because they didn't think they could, through igno- rance, through non-awareness.

As a result, Joe suggests that disabled people, having secured a post, have to over-compensate for perceived differences in production, adding extra pressure to work-life:

Joe: I think we work harder to prove that we can. You know? You're proving your self every time.

Ian feared that until there is legislation, the employer will always take the easy option, citing health and productivity for justification:

Ian: I don't know, I think they take the easy option … If you can't do 99% of the work then they don't want you. I can't really see them doing anything unless they have to.

Joe was more suspicious, suggesting that employer attitudes just reflect non-disabled attitudes towards disabled people in general, and an unwillingness to engage with issues of disability:

Joe: When disabled people do a job, and they decide to bring in others, the able-bodied people don't like it.… You know? But they don't want to think about the whole thing. They can't, they can't understand (why they must understand). You know?

A Lack of Flexibility?

In addition to employer attitudes towards disability many employers are unprepared to become more flexible in relation to issues like working hours. Such inflexibility excludes many disabled people who are unable to work a full 35–40-hour week due to tiredness and physical exertion. As Sarah and Ian describe:

Sarah: I certainly couldn't put in a 35 hour week. Although with me it does sort of go over, but it's not a 9-to-5 job if you understand me. If I had to do a 9-to-5 job I just wouldn't be physically fit to do a 9-to-5 job. (.) so there's no flexibility.

Ian: I have a friend that got a job two years ago and they asked him whether he could do (a task) and he said he couldn't guarantee it—and they said no guarantee, no job—a straight answer like.

Getting to Work

Even if a disabled person manages to secure a post they encounter a whole series of new problems, the foremost of which is how to get back and forth to work on a daily basis. Donegal, and the Republic of Ireland in general, has a low level of accessible

transport. In addition to an inaccessible public transport system, there are just a few community and charity vehicles, and mobility allowances are restricted to just a few disabled people (in 1988, only 1179 people were considered eligible for mobility allowance and 66 for a motorised transport grant across Ireland (Conroy, 1994)). As a result, disabled people are reliant on taxis to transport them about a predominately rural county. As Peter, Andrew and Tom discussed, transport problems constitute a major restriction on disabled people accessing the workplace:

Peter: I think the biggest single problem not only amongst disability but all the other different organisations is transport. We just have no transport. So, you create a job tomorrow in (Bulcratty) but you'd get no workers as there's just no transport to get you there. That's just a major (.) a major problem to begin with.

Andrew: The transport service is the main thing. Most people do rely on taxis which is a major hassle to a wheelchair user like. You have to be lifted on and lifted off.... With the buses they are all sort of step on, or you have someone to help lift-on and lift-off, and many bus drivers now are probably not insured to lift-on and off people. I don't know what the insurance is. I've just had an experience going on an activity weekend where I'd been lifting on the person, assisting them on and the busman is sat there. But whatever happens he's tied to his seat, you know what I mean? You can't just say can you come and help? Can you get his legs or can you help there? ... It's all right being given a free bus pass but it's no good if you are sat at a bus stop in a wheelchair with no companion. How do you get on? Generally you are talking about someone who weighs 12 or 13 stone.

Tom: There are no buses. Unless I take a taxi and I can't go anywhere and I can't afford a taxi. If the wife hadn't come back, I wouldn't be here today. I live in the country and it is difficult to rely on neighbours.

Access Once at Work

In addition to getting to work, the respondents expressed concern that most workplaces were not accessible to people with disabilities, particular those with a mobility-related impairment. This inaccessibility restricted the pool of jobs which disabled people could realistically apply for, unfairly limited their work and promotion chances once employed, and may lead to the quitting of jobs if inaccessibility was leading to ill-health, further reinforcing ableist notions of disabled people in work as unable to cope:

Peter: You can have accessibility in the workplace—you can have a lovely flat shopfloor, good toilets, (.) but general accessibility just isn't there. The workplace just isn't disability friendly at all.

Sarah: I'm a qualified legal executive. But I can't get any work because (.) A. because of access, B. because I am a wheelchair user. The majority of

the courts are inaccessible. Where I would be spending a lot of my time. And most of the solicitors ... so that automatically puts a (.) my training— that I've spent years training myself for.

Andrew: I know someone who got a job but had to quit as there were too many steps.

As Tom notes, many of the changes required are not expensive and generally require only a little flexibility by the employer:

Tom: The problem that I do see all right is the toilets and stairs, things like that, do cost but I've just been to America and they've worked out the costs and in many cases they are fairly low. I think in 9 out 10, it works out at less than 50 dollars.

Insurance

There are other barriers to gaining employment beyond gaining a post, getting to work and accessing the workplace. In particular, respondents lamented the role of the insurance companies in making car transport prohibitively expensive, restricting access to public transport and in charging employers larger premiums. As Peter and Torn discuss:

Peter: And they charge us three times the level of insurance. I've just got the insurance on my car. I rang up and gave my details and got a quote and then I mentioned I had Multiple Sclerosis and they phoned back the next day. Three times the cost because I had MS. And yet, people with disabilities, never mind women, have the safest record.... They are cover- ing a liability so there is no (.) nobody can say you have to cover them. They say 'you're taking the risk so it's up to you to set'. Because you're disabled it costs you three times as much, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Tom: Well I just want to say that the biggest thing that I have come across is this insurance thing—be it right or wrong. But, it is quite difficult to insure people with disabilities in the workplace and maybe it is the case that ( ) Before I acquired a disability I was a sales rep. but my profits would be lessened because of the extra car insurance costs. Insurance in the work- place, as well, needs to be lowered.... I mean if you were to ask a car insurance company they just pull a figure out of the air and quote it.... They need to statistically prove (.) but they can't do, that people with disabilities are a bigger risk. ( ) I think that insurers were giving very negative feedback to employers so the employers were saying that they are too big a risk to employ. It's the insurers that are the biggest problems really. ( ) Insurance is the first question, always.

Recourse to the Law?

All the respondents felt that they had little recourse to the law in cases of discrimination and where they did they felt that their position was weak, with the balance of power favouring the defendant. Many were despondent at the recent failure to pass a Quality of Life Bill. As Peter states:

> *Peter*: Our (quality of life) bill was ruled unconstitutional. So effectively where an employer says 'you've got a disability we're not going to employ you', there's nothing you can do about it.

Sarah argued that even if the Bill had been successfully passed there was a natural loophole for employers:

> *Sarah*: the majority of people do not use (.) they will not use the fact that you have a disability as to why they are not giving you the job.

Even where legislation exists, respondents complained that it was not being enforced or was only being used in its strictest sense (e.g. just buildings) even by those charged with enforcing it. For example, in relation to access Sarah and Peter reported:

> *Sarah*: Well there is a law for new buildings but they are not being made fully accessible.
> *Peter*: There's a brand new park, (.) a brand new park that's inaccessible. The new law states that all new buildings should be totally accessible. But the brand new park, just up the road here, and at the moment it has a flight of steps to get in. That's the county council, the people who are supposed to be fighting for these issues, and they go and build a flight of steps and make a (.), you know?

> *Peter*: [the] public service is meant to employ 3% of its work force with people with disabilities. But its not enforced. It's not happening. It isn't 3% of the public service has got disabilities.

In relation to insurance, respondents thought that the position of the ombudsman was weak and did little to improve the lot of disabled people:

> *Sarah*: There is an ombudsman that can turn around and give you five people that have to quote. And he can order one of them to insure you but that could be the highest amount. You have no come back on it.

Improving Access to and Experiences of Work

> *Joe*: All we ask is to be listened to. You know'?

In the course of the interviews the respondents identified a number of measures that could be used to increase disabled people's access to the labour market. Interestingly, the respondents did not lay all responsibility for their position at the feet of employers and the government. They were conscious that disabled people them-

selves needed to mobilise and become more politically vocal and active; that at present disabled people are largely reticent to fight for their rights; that disabled people have been conditioned into accepting their place in society:

> *Joe*: But I think that the more that people with disabilities make a noise then there's more chance that things will happen. You know? I just think people won't stand up and be counted.

> *Sarah*: I think that's another thing that we have to get across to disabled people is that they have a voice and they should use it. You know? And unfortunately some disabled people have (.) and perhaps those people that have been in institutions or have been disabled for a long time they'd be frightened of loosing what benefits they do have (.) what they do have, by making a noise. You know? There's that element of it. You know? But perhaps they don't realise that they can still complain or they can still turn round and say this isn't right. Its not going to effect (.) and if it does there are organisations run by disabled people that can come in (and help).

> *Tom*: there are a whole lot of people out there cribbing but they won't use their voice or they won't come forward with their views.

As such, respondents were aware that change was unlikely to occur on a large scale until they themselves started to demand change.

Disability Awareness

There was universal agreement between respondents that the most important issue that needs to be addressed is disability awareness. Both trainers and employers need to be educated in terms of the aspirations, capabilities and productiveness of disabled people; to see beyond the disability to see the person and their abilities. At present, both the general public and employers remain ignorant of disability issues and this needs to be rectified. As Sarah and Tom said:

> *Sarah*: Its the disability awareness that needs to come across. I think that there was a publicity campaign (.) BT were saying don't look at the disability, look at the ability. And that to me means, 'stop looking at the disability and see the ability'. And I think that employers need to accept that disabled people are highly trained and can do a lot more and to stop looking at the chair, or the stick, or whatever and start looking at the person.

> *Tom*: They had people there who were really shouting the praises of disabled people about attendance record, conscientious, exploding some of the myths, but there were few employers there to listen. NRB are also working with (IPEC) which is okay for the large employer but for most places employing 10–20 people it isn't (.) It's all very well giving employers awareness but the employer thinks it's a waste of time…. Trainers should at least go through a disability awareness program. Because the chances are

they haven't. They think that just because they have worked with disabled people for 10/15/20 years that this qualifies them. But a lot of people out there who say they are trainers shouldn't be training anybody. But just because they have been doing it for 10/12 years they think they are an expert on it. But they've been making the same mistakes for 10/12 years.

Improving Training

Some of the respondents suggested that is not only the attitudes of trainers which need to be improved but also the content and structure of the courses. Tom and Andrew both wanted to see training schemes include substantial periods of work experience. This would serve two purposes. First, disabled people would gain valuable experience in the workplace beyond taught skills. Secondly, employers would be exposed to the abilities of disabled people.

> *Tom*: Employers were not happy about training schemes. They preferred people who could come in with work experience, not say 'I did 6 months on that scheme and 3 months on that'. They wanted actual practical experience. Certificates were not worth anything what so ever. Training schemes need to be looked at because the employer definitely wants experience. They want someone who knows the basics of the job all right. Its all right doing FAS but one employer said to me that he would sooner like someone who had 6 months on the job experience from a joinery works than come out of FAS with diplomas. They have no idea what it is like in the workplace.

> *Andrew*: One of the problems is that, as Tom said, people have no shortage of certificates but they don't have much job experience. So you'd do training for 3/4 weeks and then you'd go to work experience for 2 weeks and then go back and keep it staggered like that.

Removing Barriers

There are a number of barriers to gaining and maintaining work that the respondents wished to see removed. As discussed, all the respondents wanted the workplace to become more accessible both in terms of transport and design. It was felt that until these two issues were tackled, whether disabled people managed to persuade employers to employ them remained largely redundant. Tom also identified two further issues that he would like to be examined. The first relates to barriers concerning job flexibility and job-share schemes which are not popular with employers because of incurred costs:

> *Tom*: I think that the problem with that ((job share)) here is that sometimes employers can incur two sets of RSI ((employment taxes)) then. If I'm working half a week and you're working half a week then the employer is having to pay two sets of RSI which is actually costing them more than to

employ 1 person for forty hours. Employers are not really wanting (.) he's looking at his costs too.

The second relates to the possibilities of disabled people employing personal assistants to aid access to the workplace:

Tom: I suppose, at the end of the day, whether people like it or not, people with disabilities do need more assistance. Maybe there is a need to recognise, just in the short-term that people with disabilities may need extra assistance—a useful thing would be personal assistants. More money to employ PAs is needed.

Providing a Legal Framework

Central to the removal of barriers is legislation. All respondents were in agreement that some sort of legislative framework needs to be in place to safeguard their prospects of obtaining and maintaining work.

Peter: Legislation seems to be something that we should be looking at a lot more.
Sarah: And enforcing it. Not just having it on the books. Somebody coming round saying, 'you're not doing this. It's against the law'.

Some pointed to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and equal opportunities legislation as models of success, arguing that although there had been some recent improvements there was a long way to go.

Tom: Well if there was something like the ADA act over here. They would have no choice.

Sarah: Well it's like the Equal Opportunity Act over here. The difference that act has made to females in the work place was unbelievable. And the fact that there has been a lot of cases taken against discrimination. ( ) If that could come in for disabled people then it gives us an avenue to go up. The only thing they have done is, in the case with people with disabilities, is provide an open door to the Department of Law and Equality, and they have budgeted that. That is a, that is a kind of opening in the door but as (Peter) said without the law on equality it hasn't got that much bite. And I personally think that until we get a kind of disability law something along the lines of the Americans then (nothing will change).

Tom offered words of caution arguing that any new legislation must provide a balance that is reasonable to employers as well.

Tom: Reasonable accommodation is the word they use over there and I think that you do have to see the two sides.… Legislation, as long as it was fair to employers then (.) it has to be fair to employers as well. There has to be a balance. The act that they have in America we could not afford something like that.… And if you can get up and show that you can do the

work then (.) well if you can't do the work you shouldn't be there in the first place. If you can't do the job you shouldn't get it. They should have the powers to sack you the same as anybody else but what they have got (.) I don't want people to give me sympathy or give me a job out the kindness of their heart but if you are able to the job (.)

Education

Interestingly none of the respondents mentioned further or higher education as a possible solution to ensuring access to the labour market. When the subject was raised many thought that further and higher education was largely inaccessible to them and other disabled people, especially those that had attended special schools. Most were not particularly hopeful for the future, although respondents agreed that if you did have the qualifications to enter third-level education that this might be a profitable avenue to explore:

> *Peter*: If you have a disability you're not going to get into mainstream 2nd level education, you're going to get sent off to special schools, who are not going to educate you.… If you went to an accessible school you could go. We don't have accessible schools here. We have a new one up the road here that's recently opened and it's only 2nd level.

> *Sarah*: You see, there was another scheme whereby ( ) disabled children into mainstream schools, helping them. That has now been shelved by the health board. So a lot of young people who were mixing with their peers are now no longer able to do that because there is no one there to be with them from the health board. Because the system of carers, the carers from the health board have gone. So what is happening is the ( ) voluntary are having to take on board a lot of these issues. And quite honestly they can't do everything. And that seems to be the case with training and (.) access (.)

> *Joe:* It's harder for people who come from those sorts of background. You know what I mean?
> *Sarah*: There's always so much stigma attached.

Differences Between Disabled and Non-disabled People

Comparing the responses of non-disabled and disabled people there are clear differences in the problems identified and the solutions proffered (see Table II). As might be expected, disabled people want to see specific improvements in labour force access that are the direct result of discrimination based upon their disability. However, an expected overlap between non-disabled and disabled issues and solutions is not readily apparent. The only common link centres on transport and the difficulties of commuting in Donegal with little income. As such, it seems as if the problems facing disabled and non-disabled people are different, and hence the

potential solutions differ. Indeed, when some of the solutions discussed by the non-disabled respondents were suggested to the disabled respondents they were met with general negativity. For example, both self-employment and co-operatives were rejected as suitable options for providing employment for disabled people:

> *Peter*: But not everybody (.) not everybody in the world can (.) be entrepreneurs. You know what I mean? That might suit a small amount of people in the first place. And it would only be a small group of disabled people. So, you would only be looking at a small group and not the whole issue, really. Start your own business—say to somebody 'oh we haven't got a job for you, go out and start your own business is not an [= answer
> *Sarah*: then] = you have the problem of when you are starting your own business of going out and touting for business, and the places you that you need to go are not accessible so how do you get the business. You know?

> *Tom*: I think it's very much up to the individual—if they have the drive to go—I mean its hard enough for someone without a disability to—with a disability I suppose it's much harder again.

> *Ian*: I don't think co-ops are a good idea.

It may be the case that the specific issues facing disabled people are pervasive and until these are removed there is little point considering issues that affect the rest of the population.

Conclusions

Disabled people's access to employment in rural Ireland is limited in a number of ways. At present, disabled people are trapped on a conveyor belt of training schemes that rarely seem to lead to long-term, secure, paid employment. These schemes can ignore the problems created by specific impairments, and trainers can be patronising, unsympathetic and under the impression that they 'know what is best' for disabled people. Making the jump from training schemes to paid employment is hampered by a number of factors. The respondents in this study found employers to be generally ignorant and fearful of disability. It was generally felt that employers had little time for disabled people and their attitudes were not helped by popular cultural representations of disabled people as under-producers. High insurance premiums and the costs needed to make their premises accessible further acerbated the problem. This it was felt was leading to discrimination and exclusion from the workplace. In addition, employers were generally inflexible, unwilling or unable to try and accommodate disabled people into their workforce. There is little legislation to help rectify this situation and what does exist is weak and ineffectual.

Whilst the respondents offered a number of potential solutions, such as disability awareness, the restructuring of training schemes to include work experience, the removal of barriers to employment relating transport, building design and to employer taxes and insurance, and strong, enforceable legislation, they were realistic about the chances of anything changing in the short term. As Sarah noted, there has

TABLE II. Disabled and non-disabled people access to employment

	Problems identified	Solutions proffered
Disabled	Poor careers advice.	Disability awareness.
	Training with no purpose.	Improved training.
	Conveyor belts of training schemes.	Explicit link between training and
	Trainers are not disability aware.	employment.
	Employers are ignorant of disability issues and discriminate.	Removal of barriers such as inaccessibility, and higher insurance
	Employers are inflexible.	premiums.
	Transport access.	Anti-discrimination legislation.
	Workplace access.	
	Weak and ineffective legislation.	
	Low education attainment.	
Non-disabled	Lack of childcare facilities.	Creche facilities.
	Seasonality of work.	Promote tourism.
	Women-biased economy.	Stop exploitation.
	Supported economy.	Provide incentives to break out of
	Need to attract employers.	benefits trap.
	Poor information on jobs.	Improve training and provide recognised
	Exploitation by employers.	qualifications on completion.
	Benefits trap.	Start co-operatives and enterprise units.
	Too much red-tape.	Make easier to become self-employed.
	Transport.	
	Peripheral location.	

been a general failure by political parties to address the needs of disabled people, and in the short term, at least, this is unlikely to change.

> *Sarah*: Well personally I would like Fianna Fail to implement their disabled policies they put in their manifesto. That they said they would do when they were in government. The first thing they said they would do is institute an independent living fund. Which means that people can employ there own PA instead of at the moment where they have to go through CE schemes. (.) but my hope is access to transport—transport for everybody. And jobs discrimination (.) and there was a whole lot (.) I can't remember, but it was in the manifesto for election (.) and to this date there has not been a single word…. (Earlier) this year we marched through Dublin and into the Dail (.) and without exception every TD got up and said yes we support you, but nothing has changed.

As the respondents proffered, however, there are a number of issues that the government and, in particular, agencies can address without political intervention or large injections of investment, such as disability awareness and improving training schemes. In the short term, at least, these issues should be addressed, drawing on the ideas of disabled people as experts of their own experiences.

NOTES

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