

Making it Work: Disabled women shaping spaces in education and employment

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Guest Contributor

As a human geographer studying disability I am always aware of surroundings, how spaces and places are organized and as a disabled [female](#) academic, even more so. As disabled people we are often perceived as aliens on the scene. That is, we are not expected to be here (wherever that is).

Until very recently, disabled people have been trapped in a parallel universe built on lack of expectation of ability and limitation of opportunity. Hence, our arrival within the academy is often unexpected. Social policy and legislative changes have aided in removing barriers. Established boundaries or comfort zones are constantly challenged by the outsiders having a tentative presence on the inside of academia. It is work simply for disabled academics and students to be present in academic space. Such efforts use large amounts of physical and emotional energy for a population where energy is often at a premium. This situation is of course coupled with the need to pass or minimize ones disability according to non-disabled perceptions of physicality or aesthetics or ways of perceiving.

What is often not discussed is the level of creativity required for us to use these unexpected spaces while at the same time making it look seamless. Change is, however, taking place as we move in from the edges. We often change the landscape simply by showing up. Hence, the academic landscape is slowly changing on both sides to the desk.

Disabled men and women are embracing their unique non-conformist bodies, remapping, remaking and shaping the academic landscape on our own terms. The academy is much richer for it. Statistical evidence also reinforces the value of shifting these boundaries. Disabled women and men with higher education are far more likely to gain, maintain and advance in the labour market. Just imagine the possibilities if we could use our energies for academic studies instead of scaling obstacles.

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