

Gender, Disability and Political Representation: Understanding the Experiences of Disabled Women

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Women face multiple barriers during political recruitment and representational processes. Concomitantly, a burgeoning scholarship has revealed the existence of various obstacles to elected office faced by disabled people. While studies have examined the intersections between gender, race and class, we know little about how the intersection between disability and gender shapes people's experiences. This article provides an exploratory case-study analysis of the UK. We centre the perspectives of disabled women in our analysis, drawing upon qualitative interviews undertaken with 41 disabled women candidates, politicians and party activists, as well as participant observation of online events organised to discuss disabled women and elected office. Three themes emerged from this research: first, disabled women feel that they are perceived as 'not up to the job'; second, disabled women are 'othered' during recruitment processes; and, third, hyper-visibility experienced by some, but not all, disabled women can be experienced positively but mainly negatively.

Keywords: gender; disability; disabled women; political recruitment; candidates; representation

Key messages:

- This article provides analysis of disabled women's experiences of political recruitment processes.
- Disabled women experience barriers because of the intersection between gender and disability.
- Disabled women are viewed as being not up to the job, are othered and are rendered hyper-visible.
- These perceptions are reported by disabled women from all parties.

Introduction

Gender and politics scholars have highlighted cultural, institutional and attitudinal obstacles that shape whether, how, where and in what ways women serve as elected representatives (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Paxton, Hughes and Barnes, 2020). While research on disability and politics is still in its infancy, scholars have identified cultural, institutional and attitudinal barriers facing disabled people¹ seeking elected office and once they are elected (Langford and Levesque, 2017; Evans and Reher, 2020; Waltz and Schippers, 2021). Research on political representation – from recruitment to analysis of legislators’ behaviour once elected, and their relationship to and with the represented - has also examined the myriad ways in which gender intersects with other structural forms of oppression, such as race, ethnicity, religion or class, to create additional barriers for specific groups of (aspiring) politicians (Smooth, 2011; Hardy-Fanta, 2013; Gershon et al, 2019). However, there has been little attention paid to the intersection between gender and disability, and how this might shape disabled women’s experiences of the political recruitment process or their role as legislators.

This research draws on interviews with 41 disabled women candidates, politicians, and party activists in the UK as well as participant observation of three online events organised to discuss disabled women and elected office. From the data we identify three key themes: disabled women are perceived as ‘not up to the job’; they are ‘othered’ during recruitment processes; and the hyper-visibility experienced by some, but not all, disabled women can be experienced positively but is mainly experienced negatively. While these themes will be familiar to those engaged with work on gender and political recruitment and representation, the interviewees emphasised the intersection between gender and disability, and in some instances race and class, in order to show how they were perceived differently to non-disabled women and men as well as disabled men.

By providing insights into the barriers that disabled women face in the political sphere, the study contributes to our more general understanding of how the intersection of gender and disability marginalizes individuals. The preamble to the UN’s Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities recognises that disabled women and girls are ‘often at greater risk, both within and outside the home, of violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation [...]’² Indeed, disabled women occupy a precarious and disadvantaged position, relative to both non-disabled women and disabled men, in all areas of social life, including education, employment, healthcare, social care, housing and transport (Thomas, 1999, 2006). In the UK, over a decade of cuts to disability benefits, along with the as yet unknown long-term effects of a global pandemic, have further entrenched the social inequalities experienced by disabled women (Ryan, 2019; Clifford, 2020). Feminist disability scholars have simultaneously disrupted feminism’s focus on non-disabled women (Erevelles, 2011; Kafer, 2015), while also challenging the absence of gender from disability rights activism and scholarship (Wendell, 1989; Lloyd, 1992). One of their most important objectives has been to insist that disabled women constitute agentic political subjects (Morris

¹ The language surrounding disability differs according to context. In the UK the strong stated preference of the disability rights movement is for disability first language in order to emphasise how people are disabled by society. As this paper focuses on a UK case study, we also use disability first language.

² See Preamble point q <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html> Accessed 28.3.22

1996). We also insist on the importance of understanding the experiences of disabled women as political actors.

The article proceeds as follows: we review relevant scholarly literature relating to what we know about women's and disabled people's barriers to elected office, before setting out the key ideas associated with undertaking intersectional analysis of political representation. Next, we set out the methods and methodology for this study, before discussing the three themes which emerged from the empirical material.

Gender, Disability and Intersectional Approaches to Political Representation

There is a wealth of global research revealing and analysing the various interconnected obstacles facing women who consider putting themselves forward for elected office. These obstacles include hostile or institutionally sexist political parties (Lovenduski, 2005; Kittilson, 2006; Ashe 2019); selection processes which either directly or indirectly discriminate against women candidates (Franceschet and Piscopo, 2014; Kenny and Verge, 2016); and election campaigns which include intimidation or threats of violence against women candidates (Krook, 2017; Sanín, 2020). More broadly, systemic factors in operation across representative democracies, such as party and electoral systems, can also make it harder for women to be elected (Rule, 1987). And, once women *are* elected they have to operate within highly gendered institutions which make the job of being a political representative difficult, and in some cases impossible (Hawkesworth, 2003; Lowndes, 2020). In other words, women have to face attitudinal barriers which codify politics as a male pursuit, as well as specific institutional barriers which create additional hurdles for women, either in terms of gaining access to elected office or succeeding once in place (Krook and Mackay, 2010). These barriers are codified through informal norms, formal rules, symbolism and tradition which often implicitly, if not explicitly, aim to make women representatives, or would-be representatives, feel out of place (Puwar, 2004; Rai and Johnson, 2014). These gendered barriers can be found across the Global North and the Global South and, despite some differences in how they might manifest themselves, are notable for their persistency across time and space.

For disabled people – both men and women – there also exist numerous barriers to elected office, including negative attitudes and prejudice, a shortage of resourcing, and a lack of accessibility – these barriers have been identified in studies crossing Europe, North America and Africa (D'Aubin and Stienstra, 2004; Sackey, 2015; Evans and Reher, 2020; Waltz and Schippers, 2021). Disabled people are recognized as being vastly under-represented – for example, in the European Union estimates tend to range between 1 and 2 per cent (Waltz and Schippers, 2021) compared to the 20 per cent of the population who are disabled. Some in the UK consider disabled people to be “the most under-represented group in our democracy” (Barker 2016; see also Nario-Redmond on the US 2020: 3). The cultural stigma associated with disability (Schur et al, 2013) has long manifested itself in what Nario-Redmond (2010:475) describes as the ‘pervasive and consistent’ ways in which disabled people in the US are stereotyped as dependent, incompetent, weak and asexual beings (see also Rohmer and Louvet, 2018 on France). Such stereotypes have implications for how disabled men and women might experience the process of trying to get (s)elected and then serve as representatives. Indeed, research from the US and UK shows that disabled people seeking to enter politics might try to hide or normalize their disability (Scotch and Friedman, 2014; Reher, 2022; Anspach, 1970). Concomitantly, research from Canada and the UK has

found that public perceptions of disabled politicians are not always negative (Langford and Levesque 2017: 12; Reher 2022); although research from Canada has found political institutions to be hostile to disabled people (Prince, 2009).

Our study speaks to the recruitment and representational literature that foregrounds an intersectional analysis in order to pay attention to those power dynamics and patterns of marginalization that occur amongst multiply marginalized groups, and which often get lost when an aggregate approach is adopted (Smooth, 2011; Hughes, 2011; Hardy-Fanta, 2013; Bejarano et al, 2021). Intersectionality, which originated within US Black feminism (Crenshaw, 1991), pays attention to multiple and overlapping structural oppressions, highlighting in particular how those who experience more than one form of oppression – e.g., race and gender – are differently situated. Applying intersectionality to political representation enables scholars not only to pay attention to groups which have otherwise been overlooked but it also allows for greater analysis of the power relations that occur within representational processes (Severs et al, 2019). This is particularly useful for our exploratory paper into disabled women; given the important role that both gender and disability play separately in experiences of political recruitment and representational processes, we expect that the intersection between the two might create barriers that are *particular* to disabled women.

This expectation is further supported by previous research which identifies particular attitudinal barriers. Research – largely drawn from the US - into stereotypes surrounding disabled women shows they are typically seen as frail, biologically inferior and incapable of rational thought (Silvers, 2007; Kafer, 2015; Nario-Redmond 2010). Accordingly, disabled women are often encouraged to be ‘childlike’ and ‘passive’ (Ghai, 2003:19), often presented as recipients of paternalistic policies rather than as architects of state governance. Research from Africa and Europe has found that disabled women have to work hard to overcome negative stereotypes in order to ‘convince’ others that they are capable of leadership (Gonzalez, 2009; King et al 2021). These stereotypes - as well as the marginalisation of disabled women in both the women’s movement and the disability rights movement – are experienced globally, as Anita Ghai observes in her study of gender and disability in India (2003:18), though of course these stereotypes also sit alongside local iterations.

Non-disabled women are also often perceived as less strong and authoritative political leaders than men. These disadvantages can be compensated for by stereotypes of being caring and nurturing, although Schneider and Bos (2014) have found that female politicians in the US are not viewed as possessing the qualities typically associated with women. However, other studies from the US have found that women politicians are often seen as more competent on ‘feminine’ policy issues such as childcare or social security and, as a result, do not necessarily suffer a disadvantage in the political competition (Dolan 2004; Lawless 2004; Sanbonmatsu 2002). By contrast, the female stereotype of nurturance does not apply to disabled women in the US, who are instead seen as asexual and unattractive (Nario-Redmond 2010), have a history of being denied their reproductive rights (Kallianes and Rubinfeld 1997), and in the UK have their children taken into care by the state at a much higher rate than non-disabled women (Morris, 2001). These stereotypes mean that disabled women likely lack the perceived political strengths of non-disabled women.

The stereotypes that disabled women face combined with the findings of previous research which has highlighted the unique barriers facing multiply marginalized groups in trying to access elected office means that we expect that disabled women may perceive a set of particular barriers in politics, too. Since to our knowledge no empirical research on this question has yet been conducted on which we can draw, we refrain from formulating specific hypotheses. Instead, we employ an exploratory approach in which we identify the barriers disabled women face in politics in an inductive, bottom-up way from our interview and participation observation data. We situate these findings within the relevant literature on gender, disability, intersectionality, and political recruitment in the analysis section.

Methods

Our analysis focuses on the UK: adopting a case study approach enables us to situate the discussion within a context and take account of the particular debates and cultural attitudes towards disability and gender. According to Government reports disabled people constitute around 21% of the UK's population, although this number is likely to be much higher given the tendency for people to under-report (Schur et al, 2013). Importantly, the proportion of disabled people is higher amongst women than men (ONS 2019).³ Hence, disabled women constitute a sizable minority in the UK. We understand gender as a structure, a set of social characteristics or attributes assigned to people based on their sex, which are used to regulate, control and maintain power inequalities (Rubin, 1975). We define disability in line with the social model, which emphasizes disability as a form of structural oppression whereby society disables individuals with impairments - whether physical, cognitive, mental or developmental - by creating or failing to eliminate barriers which hinder their full participation on an equal basis (Oliver, 2013). Both the women's movement and disability rights movement are relatively high profile in the UK, although recent research with disabled women has highlighted, in line with previous studies (Morris, 1991), that they experience ableism within the women's movement and sexism within the disability rights movement (Evans, 2020).

This research draws upon interview and participant observation data, and is shaped by a methodology which centres the voices and perspectives of disabled women. We undertook 41 semi-structured interviews with aspiring and elected disabled women politicians between 2019 and 2021. Of the 41 interviewees 36 were white and 5 were minority ethnic. Participants had a wide range of impairments – the largest group were those with a mobility impairment – however, many reported multiple, often both physical and mental impairments. Participants included those with both visible and invisible impairments. Some interviews were conducted in-person in public spaces or in interviewees' homes, while others were conducted online or over the telephone following the outbreak of COVID (all were fully transcribed) (see Appendix A). Prior to the interviews, participants were sent an information sheet setting out the aims and objectives of the research. Participants signed a consent form and were made aware of how the material would be used – all interviewees were told that they could request a copy of the transcript, none took up this offer. On a couple of occasions some interviewees explicitly stated that certain quotes and discussions could not be used and we omitted those from our analysis.

³ See the Office for National Statistics <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/articles/measuringdisabilitycomparingapproaches/2019-08-06> [accessed 31.3.22]

Interviewees were recruited as part of a broader project examining disability and political representation; all the major political parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green and SNP), disability organisations and the Local Government Association distributed the call for participants via their memberships and networks (using email lists as well as social media); they also suggested people to contact. The interviews were conducted by four disabled and non-disabled women. Importantly, the interviews were not organized, or principally designed, to explore the intersection of gender and disability *per se*, rather they were intended to allow the individual to reflect on what they considered to be the barriers and structural inequalities that shaped their experiences of being involved with electoral politics (an additional 40 interviews were undertaken with men). While gender was not the primary focus of the interviews, our approach to the interviews and the broader research project was shaped by an intersectional understanding of disability, i.e., that disability does not exist in a vacuum and is intimately connected to other structural forms of oppression such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, and migrant status (Erevelles, 2011).

Looking for references to and discussions of gender revealed that it was disabled women who talked about gender, and not disabled men. Thus, our approach to coding and interpreting the data prioritised the intersection between gender and disability as experienced by disabled women. Some women explored gender at great length while others simply noted that it made the barriers to elected office more complex and difficult to negotiate (as we explore below). Questions were designed to be open-ended, e.g., ‘can you tell us a bit about any barriers you may have faced during the candidate selection process’, so as to enable the research participants to guide the interviews in the direction that best reflected their own experiences. Analysing the interview data involved firstly re-reading all interview transcripts we had undertaken with women in order to identify any mention of or discussion of gender. Second, we sought to create categories of how and when gender was mentioned by the interviewees, before finally drawing out the wider themes that emerged from those categories. In other words, we did not look to find evidence for certain patterns but rather used the interview data and the experiences of disabled women to identify the norms in an exploratory fashion.

We also attended three online meetings (May and June, 2021 and February, 2022), organised by Elect Her, an organization dedicated to increasing the number of women in elected office,⁴ to explicitly discuss disabled women’s experiences in the UK. For the most part we observed the meetings but we also contributed some of our research findings where relevant and when invited to do so. We put in the chat at the start of the sessions that we were working on disability and political representation and included our email addresses should anyone want to follow up with us; as a result of this several women got in touch, which resulted in further interviews. We made extensive notes during these sessions and have re-read those along with the interviews to identify common themes. Unfortunately, we are not able to provide any demographic data on the participants of the online meetings – some participants talked about, for instance, their experiences of the intersection between disability and class or disability and race but we did not collect this data nor did all participants introduce themselves.

⁴ See Elect Her <https://www.elect-her.org.uk/> accessed 3.2.22

Ensuring the work is politically useful and not extractivist in nature is critical; we spoke with all of our interviewees about how we could best use the findings from our research to improve politics for disabled people – which resulted in us disseminating our research to a wide range of political parties and interested stakeholders. Ensuring an open dialogue both in advance of the interview, as well as during and following the conclusion of the interview, helped us to try and avoid creating unnecessary power dynamics between interviewee and interviewer.

‘Not up to the job’

Around a third of our interviewees reported that they had experienced explicit discrimination or had suffered deliberate attempts to discredit their claims to be a viable candidate. Interestingly, those women who had experienced such forms of discrimination reported that it was primarily undertaken by individuals within their own party as well as by external electoral opponents or the media. For example, one local councillor described the hostility she had faced as a disabled working-class woman:

I encountered the most dreadful discrimination. I'm not university-educated and I'll just put it very crudely. I'm a working class, single mother and I was in a low paid job. I don't like using these terms but it's to kind of give you the picture of what I was up against. He was a very affected, middle-class man who had preconceptions and obviously didn't want me to be the candidate. (P8)

The interviewee, a member of the Labour party (the UK's progressive centre-left party with strong links to the trade union movement) described how the man had “waged a campaign” against her in order to prevent her from becoming a candidate and then subsequently a councillor. This interviewee went on to describe how he had tried to prevent her from attending her own campaign meetings once she was selected as a candidate. This targeted campaign was, she felt, driven by the fact that some within her own party believed she “wasn't up to it.” In fact, this interviewee was eventually elected, but her experiences had a lasting impact in terms of how she viewed not only herself but also her party - a party which has long prided itself on championing diversity.

Other interviewees also recounted the ways in which party colleagues had either explicitly or implicitly indicated that they did not believe them to be up to the job. For instance, one participant reported being told at a training event that was being run for women candidates not to reveal the fact that she was disabled:

I was told in the candidates training [...] that if I declared my disability I would not be selected. I'd be seen as weak and I would not be selected and therefore because I didn't have an openly visible disability I was told to keep quiet about it and declare it afterwards. (P21)

The fact that this experience was recounted, again, by a member of the Labour Party, which has a strong record on women's political recruitment thanks to the use of gender quotas, hints at the pervasive nature of ableism even within spaces where other structural forms of oppression (namely gender) are taken seriously. The interviewee reflected on how this had made her feel “side-lined”, “overlooked” and “disrespected”, and although she was eventually selected, she felt “humiliated” by the experience (P21). The irony of this sexist

advice, to avoid being seen as “weak”, being given at an event to train more women to put themselves forward for elected office was not lost on our interviewee. Similarly, others from across the political spectrum reported that the selection process for disabled women was “not comfortable” (P19) and that they were not treated as serious prospective candidates. As one local politician with a visible impairment reflected: “a couple of party members definitely treated me like you know, ‘Oh, isn’t it nice that she’s putting herself forward’, but I don’t think ever considered me a serious candidate” (P5). Meanwhile, during the events dedicated to encouraging more disabled women to put themselves forward for elected office, several participants – including those with both visible and invisible impairments - reflected that very often disabled women were viewed as “risky candidates” whom the public may not like (May 2021 event).

One interviewee discussed how she felt that her mental health meant that others within her party often undermined her – especially when she was in a position of authority:

I was Chair of the [X] party and was bullied mercilessly ‘cause when you’re in the chair you are a very public figure and chairing meetings, [...] I had a panic attack in one meeting. I ended up having to leave the room. I did come back into the room ‘cause I was absolutely clear in my own mind that I had to face that demon and go back in the room. Again, that’s about expectations on women and anxiety and a lack of empathy on how people conduct themselves in meetings. (P17)

This interviewee felt that there was a particular style of doing politics, one which meant that those who did not conform were not viewed as serious or capable candidates. Another interviewee with multiple impairments revealed that she had been accused of “milking her disability” in order to get selected because she would not be able to get selected in any other way. She also reflected on her wider experiences of discrimination in the party:

I have experienced bullying within the party and that bullying is tied to misogyny but also to ableism. A dislike of me as a disabled woman. (P36)

Experiences of bullying, underpinned by gendered ableism, were also compounded by the reactions of others (and the anticipated reaction of others) beyond the party to the idea of a disabled woman as an elected politician. For example, one national politician with a visible impairment discussed how nobody believed she was the candidate at her own election count (Elect Her May 21 event), while another national politician discussed how she did not disclose the fact she was disabled during her election campaign because she thought it would be “weaponized” by her opponents to undermine her credibility (*ibid*).

Another theme which emerged revolved around having to work twice as hard to prove themselves as credible candidates. This is a common theme in the gender and politics literature, and more broadly is also a common problem faced by disabled people. However, for the disabled women we interviewed and who participated in the events, there was a clear recognition of how they as disabled women faced such particular stereotypes in relation to their physical stamina that they often ended up pushing themselves to the very limit; one Liberal Democrat local councillor recounted how in her efforts to be taken seriously as a candidate she had worked such long hours that she had ended up being hospitalized (P17).

These findings demonstrate the various experiences of disabled women who felt that they were not taken seriously; part of the explanation for this lies in the ways in which disabled women are othered in recruitment and representational process.

All political parties in the UK have processes for vetting and approving potential candidates for elected office. These processes typically involve a combination of assessment days and training events, during which time aspiring politicians learn how to communicate why they would make a good representative (Ashe, 2019). Hence, during selection and election campaigns, candidates are expected to demonstrate and articulate that they are essentially up to the task. Or, in other words, that *they*, rather than either their internal party competitors during selection or rival party candidates during the election, are the best person for the job - this process is underpinned by a supposedly gender-neutral approach to meritocracy (Murray, 2014). Findings from our qualitative research indicated a common feeling amongst disabled women that others did not consider them to be up to the job – and that this was grounded in their identity as disabled women. This chimes with findings from previous research which has found that many disabled candidates, both men and women, feel undermined at various stages during the (s)election process (Evans and Reher, 2020). However, analysing the experiences of the interviewees reveal that they believed there to be a gendered ableism at work in how others reacted to the idea of a disabled woman putting herself forward for elected office, whether at the local or national level.

Being ‘othered’

Questioning the ability of disabled women to perform the role of an elected representative inevitably positions them as ‘other’ to the standard male non-disabled politician, a theme which we now explore in greater detail. One interviewee, now an elected SNP politician, observed that for her being a disabled woman in public office meant a constant process of “being othered”

I had people even within my own party you know immediately othering me and trying to shuffle me out of events and organising and campaign days which is...it still happens even now. But it’s particularly bad when you are disabled and it’s particularly bad when you are a young person and it’s particularly bad when you are female so that was quite difficult and then obviously there’s the fact that you’re entering an arena which has been designed for a specific type of person and if you don’t match that demographic then you’re going to come up against extra barriers. (P37)

The added burden placed upon disabled women and particularly, for the interviewee above, young disabled women to prove themselves in response to being othered meant that they were expected to simultaneously confirm to the ideal stereotype of a politician while also being noticeably treated differently. For instance, another interviewee discussed how she had been expected to disclose personal and intimate medical details (P36). Othering disabled women has consequently meant that some disabled women report feeling a sense of ‘imposter syndrome’, a phenomenon that refers to people doubting their own abilities and/or right to be in a particular role. Imposter syndrome was discussed during one of the Elect Her events (February 2022) where participants expressed very similar views about feeling as though they themselves were not always up to the job. The internalization of external norms has very serious consequences, most obviously at the individual level but also in a collective

sense if disabled women feel that they do not belong in positions of power. This has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: if disabled women who do attempt to navigate the selection and election process are othered and questioned about their ability to do the job, it may inevitably act as a deterrent.

One of the consequences of this particular form of othering is the fact that discussions around diversity of representation tend to focus upon women as a homogenous social group, rather than on disabled women *per se*. This lack of focus has led some to think about how disabled women are absent from these debates and conversations. For instance, one Labour interviewee reflected on the under-representation of disabled women in politics:

When you think that close on 20% of people have a disability and within that disability, it's statistically proven that it's more women that have a disability, we should have that. We should be looking for that level of representation in public life and we don't have anywhere near that at all (P23).

Similarly, a Conservative interviewee highlighted how conversations about representation were only focused on “certain types of women” (P37), a view shared by a Liberal Democrat interviewee who argued, “It shouldn't just be more women. That's something that really makes me cross” (P9). At the same time, it is true that recently there has been some focus on disabled women's entry into elected office – the fact that we attended three Elect Her events on this very topic over the course of a year indicates that it is at least on the radar of organizations set up to increase the number of women in public life. However, several of our interviewees across the political spectrum did stress the importance of raising awareness of the need to increase the number of disabled women politicians:

At the moment the focus is still very much just on women and ethnic minorities and it's only because I'm disabled that I've been able to push the disability side and for disabled women. (P2)

For this interviewee her role as a disabled woman meant that she was able to help push forward the idea of descriptive representation generally in terms of disability and specifically for disabled women.

For other interviewees, the othering of disabled women meant that they had to emphasize either the fact that they were a woman *or* that they were disabled, as to emphasize both would be deemed too much. Indeed, when developing her concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw highlighted this process of othering as political intersectionality (1991) – a process by which specific groups are marginalized by each of the various wider social groups to which they belong. In this case non-disabled women other them as disabled and disabled men other them as women. For example, one participant recounted “if you were a disabled woman you had to kind of choose whether you were going to focus on women's politics or disabled politics” (P26). This decision to focus on one aspect of their identity, or in fact neither, was also discussed during one of the events. For disabled women there was a sense that it was harder for them to engage meaningfully in the deliberative process because the culture and language of politics was felt to be “masculine and ableist”. One of our participants

reflected on the fact that disabled women aren't "celebrated" in the same way as non-disabled women:

We celebrate International Women's Day and I think more councillors should celebrate Disability Day. But we don't celebrate the first disabled woman Labour councillor, we celebrate the first woman to be in political representation and I think that should be the same with disability as well. (P3)

One potential consequence of the (perceived) absence of celebrated disabled women is that they might be less likely to be seen as high-profile role models, who have the potential to encourage more disabled women to put themselves forward for elected office (cf Phillips, 1995).

As Mohamed and Shefer (2015) argue, gendered and ableist norms are used to justify and sustain the marginalization and "othering" of bodies and minds that do not conform – especially those belonging to disabled women. As we identified previously, much work on political candidates and political representation has observed that non-disabled men constitute the norm in terms of elected representatives (Murray, 2014); one of the results of this is that the disabled woman politician is effectively 'othered'. More broadly, women politicians have frequently reflected on the fact that when people think of a politician they think of a man in a suit (Harman, 2017): coding politicians as male has inevitably resulted in female politicians being coded as other (Childs, 2008). For disabled women this othering takes on an additional dimension as the intersection between gender and ableism renders disabled women almost illegible as political representatives.

Hyper-visibility

In homogenous institutions which are dominated by men and also by non-disabled politicians, some disabled women are marked out by their hyper-visibility. They become visible examples of what Nirmal Puwar refers to as "space invaders" (2005): those people who do not look like those bodies which traditionally occupy positions of privilege and power. In the UK, Westminster and, to a lesser extent, other national and local legislatures are dominated by the bodies of white non-disabled men. Some disabled women in those spaces are therefore rendered hyper-visible. Some of our interviewees reported feeling a sense of being hyper-visible as a result of both their gender and disability, but more importantly because of their identity as disabled women. For many, this sense of heightened visibility proved problematic or tricky to navigate, while for some this visibility was a boon to their (s)election campaigns, as one former Member of Parliament observed:

Being female helped and having a disability helped. There was the odd constituent when we knocked on the door who said, 'Well I don't know. How's she going to do it?', and slammed the door in our face but you just have to put up with that. That's politics [laughs]. That happens. That can happen anyway but generally I was treated with a great deal of support. It was all very positive for me. (P1)

For this interviewee then, even while recounting how people had sometimes reacted negatively to her candidacy, she still felt that her identity was in fact an asset, as she went on to explain: "So by the time the election came along because of my disability and because I was a woman, you know, people knew who I was. I stuck out in the crowd, you know" (P1).

For this interviewee her identity as a (physically) disabled woman was “an added advantage.” A local councillor observed that although her identity as an ethnic minority disabled woman marked her out and meant that she assumed the party’s attempts to recruit more diverse candidates would likely benefit her. However, despite her party’s (Labour) call for greater diversity she got no additional help with actually completing the process of putting herself forward for national office (P10).

This gap between equality rhetoric, the stated aim of a party to recruit more diverse candidates (Lovenduski, 2005), and any practical or meaningful support to help those people navigate the process calls attention to the tendency to pay lip service to selecting candidates whose bodies are visibly ‘different’ to the norm, a point observed by other interviewees. One participant, a member of the Labour party, told us about how she didn’t feel her party was “bold enough” to select a trans disabled woman (P12); to her mind, she was too visibly “different” and deviated too far from the traditional characteristics typically associated with politicians. Another interviewee, this time from the Conservative party, discussed how she was “the only visible Black person” at many events and while local meetings were often welcoming, the national party “couldn’t be bothered really” (P13). To her mind her visibility as a Black disabled woman marked her out as different but, and despite calls for greater diversity, this did not translate into any active help or encouragement. This was a view echoed by another interviewee, “Just randomly hoping for the best and sending women on confidence building exercises is not enough. It doesn't fix the systemic issues” (P26).

Of course, some disabled women experience the inverse of hyper-visibility because their impairment is invisible or hidden, meaning they are not read by others as disabled. Indeed, previous research has observed the instability of both invisibility and visibility of disability for disabled women (Mitchell, 2001: 392). Our interviewees with invisible impairments had to navigate a different course, one in which they were expected to constantly declare the fact that they were disabled, and this was a process that had to be repeated in different contexts and with different groups of people in order for them to lay claim to the identity of a disabled woman. During one of the Elect Her events there was some discussion of when or indeed whether it was sensible to disclose the fact that you are disabled, with one participant recalling that she had decided against making her impairment(s) public for fear that it would be used against her by her political opponents (February 2022 event). Additionally, one interviewee, a member of the Scottish National Party, which has a very active disabled members group, reflected on the fact that she was not considered disabled enough and had people within her party request medical information to prove her claim to be disabled, which she viewed as an act of “ableist misogyny” (P36).

This visibility brings with it a potential set of expectations, namely that they are expected to act as representatives for their specific social group, an assumption not made about representatives from dominant groups. Moreover, any perceived mistakes or missteps could be taken as a reflection of the capability of the whole group, leading some to potentially distance themselves or shift their identity in order to negotiate the various cultures and norms which pervade political institutions, as Dickens et al (2019) observed in relation to Black women in the workforce (see also Kanter, 1977).

Conclusion

In this article we have examined how disabled women perceive the intersection between gender and disability to have shaped their own experiences of political recruitment and as representatives. While some of the themes, notably the idea of imposter syndrome and being seen as not being up to the job, are common amongst women more broadly, and especially in relation to Black women politicians (Cummings, 2021), it is also true that disabled women perceive the intersection between gender and disability to produce particular challenges and barriers – importantly, these perceptions were reported by women from across different parties and in relation to both local and national level politics. In part these barriers are produced because of the entrenched gendered and ableist nature of political recruitment and representational processes which are based upon the interests of non-disabled men. Meanwhile the wider set of interviews from which the data used for this study was drawn reveals that these themes emerged mainly from the interviews undertaken with disabled women and not disabled men. Indeed, some interviewees recognized that being a disabled woman in public life posed a radical challenge to the established order.

Situating our research within broader studies which have found negative stereotypes of disabled women as well as the barriers facing women candidates and disabled candidates, our paper has developed our understanding of a little studied group – disabled women aspiring and current politicians. We identified three key themes: first, that disabled women are considered not up to the job; second, that disabled women are ‘othered’ by non-disabled men and women and by disabled men; and third, that some, but not all, are rendered hyper-visible which creates its own set of problematics and tensions. The findings from this research underscore the important methodological point that in order to understand how those from multiply marginalized groups experience political processes it is necessary to centre their experiences and to draw the findings inductively.

While the experiences and perceptions of the interviewees chimed with many findings from the gender and disability studies literature, it was also clear that the participants thought their identity as disabled women – and the intersection between gender and disability – had particular effects and raised specific challenges which they had to face. Of course, disabled women do not constitute a homogenous group in and of themselves, and there are a wide variety of impairments in addition to differences of race, class, religion, sexuality, migrant status and nationality. However, despite the heterogeneity of the group, the themes which emerged were remarkably consistent. Paying attention to the intersections between gender and disability is important, while our interviewees identified a lack of attention paid to disabled women when it comes to political recruitment strategies, it is also clear that conversations are beginning to take place. While it is to be welcomed that external organizations that focus on women’s electoral participation are taking place, it is also necessary for parties and political institutions more broadly to ensure that disability is part of their approach to gender equality and that gender equality is part of their approach to disability.

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