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EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN WITH AUTISM

EXAMINING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN WHO PARTICIPATED
IN THE EMPLOYMENTWORKS¹ PROGRAM

WHAT WE KNOW

To date there is limited research that has focused on employment and young women with autism², in part because it is diagnosed less frequently in females. There are four times as many males diagnosed with autism than females, and this ratio increases to 5.5:1 for individuals without an intellectual disability.³ To date, findings from studies that reported on predictors of employment and gender have been mixed⁴⁻⁶. Some identify being female as a predictor of employment, and others suggest being male is a predictor.

EmploymentWorks (EW) offers employment preparedness training for women and men. It provides participants opportunities to enhance their job readiness skills and enables exposure to various employment industries to augment entry to employment. EW was interested in examining the employment outcomes of the young women who participated in EW, and determining the similarities and/or differences in their employment rates, compared to the young men who completed the program.

We could simply calculate the employment rates among women and men in the program, however we felt it was important to interpret these results in their 'layered contexts', recognizing that **there are a number of important individual, family, school, community and societal factors that may influence employment outcomes for individuals with autism.**

Key Factors Influencing Employment Outcomes

INDIVIDUAL

Age:

Increased age has been found to be a predictor of employment.⁷



Educational Attainment:

Those with greater levels of education have been found to have higher rates of employment.^{4,5,7}



Independence:

The ability to complete activities of daily living, such as cooking a meal, completing banking transactions, having a driver's license or navigating public transportation are positively correlated with working.⁸



Social Communication Abilities:

The ability to communicate effectively is highly valued by employers and there is growing evidence that women with autism and average intelligence present with better social communication skills than their male equivalents^{9,10}, which may positively influence employability.



Co-occurring Mental Health Issues:

Co-occurring mental health issues have been reported to negatively influence employment outcomes for individuals with autism.



FAMILY

Family Supports:

Greater parental expectations and involvement in transitioning from high school are positively associated with acquiring employment.^{4,9}



SOCIETAL

Gender Stereotypes:

While we did not find gender stereotypes in our data, it is noted that different opportunities and gender biases may exist in our society which may have a bearing on employment options and outcomes for women and people with gender diversities.¹⁴ How this is confounded with a diagnosis of autism merits further research. We did not collect data on gender identities beyond female and male.



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WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

As of May 2018, 262 participants have completed the EW program. 76% were men and 24% were women, which corresponds with the proportion of males who have a diagnosis of autism. The participants were similar in age, educational attainment, understanding of single word vocabulary (a proxy for Verbal IQ) and the reported severity of autistic symptoms based on the Social Responsiveness Scale-2.¹¹ The proportion of participants in each group who identified with a minority group were also equivalent.

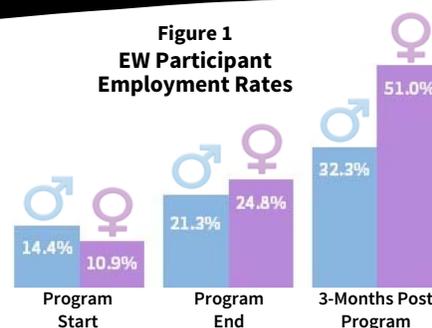
There were no significant differences between the men and women related to independence on activities of daily living as measured by the Waisman ADL¹², and self-identified ability to independently navigate transportation. Previous work histories were also similar with 33% of men and 31% of women indicating that they had been employed during the previous year.

While the men and women in EW were similar on the above independence-related variables, they differed in their age of diagnosis, and co-existence of mental health concerns. Specifically, **women in EW were diagnosed later in life compared to men in the program**, with significantly more women diagnosed with autism as an adult. This is similar to trends described in the literature.¹

The second area of distinction was **women's heightened experience related to two of the ten mental health concerns probed** (anxiety, low self-esteem, mood swings, self-injury, difficulty concentrating, depression, panic attacks, uncomfortable in social situations, anger management and hyperactivity). On the application to the program, **women identified experiencing depression (48%) and panic attacks (25%) significantly more than the men (27% and 13%, respectively)**. The proportion of women versus men who endorsed other mental health issues were similar.

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Figure 1
EW Participant Employment Rates



Employment Rates

The employment rates at the beginning of the program and at the end were very similar. Three months following the program, participants were contacted by phone to inquire about their employment status.

We were able to reach 80% of the men and 81% of the women. It was interesting to note that the **women were significantly more likely to have found a job, with over half indicating they were employed** (Figure 1).



All of the participants who reported being employed were working in entry level positions in industry sectors related to customer service/retail sales, food services and general labour.

The employment rates following EW are encouraging when compared to national statistics.* **For the women in the program, the later age of diagnosis and endorsing depression or panic attacks on the application seemingly did not negate post-program employment attainment.**

*The employment rate for individuals with autism reported in the 2012 Canadian Survey on Disability is 14.3%. The EW sample size is relatively small and not necessarily characteristic of those included in the survey and results must be interpreted in that context.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

As women are typically diagnosed at an older age, it may be especially important to connect with adolescent/adult diagnostic centres/clinics to increase awareness about access to and the impact of programs like EWC that support the employment journeys for youth and adults with autism.