CHAPTER 4

Labor Market Inequality

Disability is seen more as a liability than as an asset [to employers]. PWDs

I feel yes they can [PWDs can work] if they are given the opportunity. Work is there for them to do. I don’t think they want to stay home and not do anything. If the opportunity is there, I think they would go at it and do their best at it and function just as well as anybody else. Caregiver.

The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2000, 25) argues that “a large proportion of persons with disabilities live their lives in poverty because of their inability to find jobs.” Chapter 4 presents pioneering evidence of disability-induced labor market inequalities in Jamaica. It describes the value ascribed to employment by PWDs. Structural labor market marginalization of PWDs compared to nondisabled persons is assessed through labor force participation, employment, unemployment, occupation, and income analyses. The chapter documents improvements in the labor market position of PWDs despite differences such as type(s) of educational institution(s) attended, gender, disability type, and severity using secondary census and primary data. Discriminatory working conditions and labor market barriers, which continue to challenge PWDs despite improved educational achievements, are examined.

4.1 Valuing Employment

The value assigned to employment through the eyes of PWDs and their caregivers contextualizes its fundamental importance despite restricted entry and suppressed labor market mobility, which are rooted principally in active and involuntary discrimination. A PWD argues, “Not because he has a physical disability, means he cannot do it. Maybe he can’t do it with his hands. He can come up with the idea and tell somebody who is able to do it with their hands, but that’s depriving him of doing something [working and attaining
life goals].” The employment potential of PWDs is recognized, and the determination to achieve autonomy and independence is resolute: “People [PWDs] are to get better work . . . certain jobs where we can help ourselves.” This insightful comment underscores the fact that many PWDs self-classify as working poor with resultant material disadvantages, poor living conditions, and related social tensions. Work also importantly marks the transition from childhood to adulthood in Jamaica and is a source of forming social relationships. Thus, where work is absent, many experience low self-esteem, stress, and depression, which affect overall wellness:

I have work sometimes. When I don’t have work, I am unhappy. PWDs.

I ask him [son] if he is all right and he says, yes but he wants a job. That’s his problem. About last month he was very sick . . . I took him to the doctor. I couldn’t find out what was wrong. Doctor says he’s stressed. So the doctor says I must find out from him what really happen and so I asked him. He says he wants a job because I am both mother and father—me alone. He says I get old now and it is time for me to sit and he’ll work . . . I don’t know if there is any business place left in St. Ann’s Bay, Ocho Rios or Runaway Bay where I have not tried to get a job for him . . . He can’t pick up no job at all . . . When I say stressed, I mean he’s worried and sick. Caregiver.

The confident belief in the employment capabilities of PWDs and the harsh reality of life fuels discontent and resentment to the discriminatory underutilization of skill sets. A caregiver amplifies the economic and civil case for inclusion:

A whole restructuring of the system [the macroeconomic structure of the country is needed] because I believe that it is good economically to assist everybody who is a part of the labor capital because you don’t know what somebody’s potential might be. Everybody needs equal opportunity—both disabled or nondisabled. With opportunity, the disabled person will be of benefit to the country itself and to everyone . . . It’s also something that will benefit the persons themselves who are abled [nondisabled] . . . [thereby] making a valid contribution. Caregiver.

The case of employment exclusion and underemployment of PWDs becomes more compelling considering that only a minority (4 percent) of PWDs were severely disabled and profoundly incapacitated in 2004 in contrast to common perceptions about the unemployability of PWDs. This finding is consistent with Hirsch’s (2000, 413) postulation that the proportion of PWDs who are not potential workers “is probably considerably smaller than most people imagine.” The vast majority (96 percent) of interviewees were employable and confirms predictions of PWDs regionally, who also argue