

Stuck Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Disabled Dancers Trapped in a Cycle of Dependence

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Written by Mutsumi Karasaki, Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, and Joop Oonk, Founder, Artistic Director Misiconi Dance Company

Jeroen¹ was one of the dancers, who performed in an event that Misiconi Dance Company presented at the beautiful Biblical Museum in collaboration with other artists. The performance was a part of Amsterdam Dance Event and Museumnacht - two of the biggest cultural events in Amsterdam. As a professional dancer, he regularly works with Misiconi. However, on funding documents, he is considered a 'client' and Misiconi a 'care organisation'. This meant that, rather than hired as a freelancer for the event, he had to be contracted via a volunteer agreement, which covered little more than the cost of transportation. Due to the complicated Dutch disability benefits system, there was no way he could properly receive his full paycheck that he deserved. This is a reality for many artists and performers with disability; they are often trapped in dependence.

Jeroen is one of 250,000 people in the Netherlands receiving a Wajong payment, which is a disability benefit for people with a disability at the time they turn 18. Wajong² provides payments up to 75 percent of the minimum wage, although this will be reduced to 70 percent from 2018³. The way Wajong is set up means that recipients can only have a combined income (i.e. the Wajong payment and a wage through paid employment) equivalent to 71-95% of the full-time minimum wage for their age, regardless of how much they earn in paid employment. If a recipient earns a wage up to 20 percent⁴ of the minimum wage, they receive a Wajong payment equivalent to 75 percent of the minimum wage on top of it (in the Netherlands, the minimum wage is between €461 and €1537⁵, depending on the age of the person). If they earn a wage valued at between 20 to 35 percent of the minimum wage, their Wajong payment reduces to 50.75 percent of the minimum wage. The Wajong payment reduces each time the recipient's wage goes up a band (10% of the minimum wage), until they earn 75% of the minimum wage, when the Wajong payment gets withdrawn altogether. This system is the reason why Jeroen could only get paid at a fraction of the normal payment that performers receive; Misiconi

¹ Jeroen is a pseudonym.

² <https://www.participatienieuws.nl/vraag-en-antwoord/433-iemand-heeft-een-wajong-uitkering-en-verdient-daarnaast-geld-bij-een-werkgever-hoe-bereken-je-wat-hij-moet-terugbetalen>

³ <https://perspectief.uvw.nl/forum/s/inkomsterverrekening-bij-werken-naast-oude-wajong-0>

⁴ <https://perspectief.uvw.nl/forum/s/inkomsterverrekening-bij-werken-naast-oude-wajong-0>

⁵ <https://www.government.nl/topics/minimum-wage/contents/amount-of-the-minimum-wage>

had to be careful not to cause his Wajong payment dropping from the value equivalent to 75 percent to 50.75 percent of the minimum wage.

This system traps Wajong recipients into dependence. In a society like The Netherlands where being in paid employment is important to a sense of citizenship, not being able to work means people feel and be seen that they are not a full citizen. However, the Wajong system creates financial disincentive for them to engage in paid work. This is the reason why some parents or caretakers do decide for the Wajong recipient not to work on top of Wajong, a decision that is sometimes made in consultation with, but most often on behalf of the Wajong recipient despite their willingness to work. This bounds them to dependence.

This system is obviously based on an assumption that people with no or little arbeidsvermogen cannot earn much money, or when they do, they are considered to have a sufficient level of arbeidsvermogen and therefore no longer in need of financial support. After all, arbeidsvermogen is medically assessed in terms of economic productivity. However, just because people are assessed as having a limited or no arbeidsvermogen does not mean that they are unable to participate in meaningful work. Apart from being economically productive in a traditional sense, there are various avenues through which people can express and realise their capacity, given that they are provided with the right support. Art is one of them. For example, Chris Pavia, a dancer with Down Syndrome from Stopgap Dance Company in the UK choreographed a very successful performance called Awakening. These performances can have an impact on societal attitude. The inclusive arts in the opening ceremony of London paralympic games in 20... . changed the way many people saw the inclusive arts. There are also a few theatre and dance companies in the Netherlands that work inclusively with people with disability, including Misiconi Dance Company. Their performers usually consist of a combination of dancers and actors with and without a disability. Since becoming a registered non-profit foundation in December 2015, Misiconi had several performances at The Gathered Together Festival in Glasgow, Delft Fringe Festival, Festival aan de Maas, FLUX Maas Theater en Dans and recorded a video clip 'Science of the Heart'. Besides that the company has a talent development program, teaches community classes at the Sportieve Handy's and in IJsselmonde at Pit010. On top of that they give lectures, events and workshops. So, in such a short period of time, Misiconi has developed into a platform that provides a stage for people with disability to fulfil their artistic potential. Through these avenues, people like Jeroen, who have been assessed as having no or little arbeidsvermogen can make real contributions.

However, running an inclusive art company involves constant financial challenges: firstly, as described by the example with Jeroen and his Wajong payment, Misiconi has to constantly think about how to pay the performers with the

amount of payment that actually acknowledges their work, without compromising their disability benefits. This worry about their dancers losing Wajong payment would be irrelevant, if Misiconi had a financial capacity to give them a full-time contract that pays at above the minimum wage. However, making the company financially sustainable is a constant challenge, as a non profit art foundation; (a stichting). Like many other art organisations, Misiconi does not have a stable income, because they rely mostly on revenues from programs and government subsidies and grants, all of which fluctuate from time to time. This means that it is difficult to hire performers full-time. Our performers also face difficulties getting back on Wajong at the level that they were previously on after having a short-term contract with Misiconi, because they are now assessed as having more arbeidsvermogen. So, in offering them a contract, it is important that the company is able to offer them a long-term contract to relieve them from worrying about constantly going through the Wajong eligibility assessment. Nevertheless, be able to work in the area what their are good at give performers a sense of independence. We need to think about inclusive arts not only for the benefits of arts for the performers, but also in terms of their artistic merit based on how their performances can resonate with, affect, and move the audience.

However, this kind of artistic expression as a profession is not recognised. The Dutch society values mostly productivity in terms of traditional economic sense. This is for labor market and in the art scene. In 2014, about 22 percent of Wajong recipients worked; 12 percent working with a 'regular' employer - mostly in education or other government sector – and 10 percent working in a sheltered employment. Since the enactment of the new and rather complicated Participatiewet in 2015, only young people who are assessed as having no long-term arbeidsvermogen (the capacity to work) are eligible for a Wajong. So, these figures would drop dramatically when the figures from 2015 are released (the responsibility for supporting Wajong recipients, who were already in employment during the transition period, has been transferred to municipalities / gemeente, but that's another complicated story). A half of these people working with a regular employer lose their job within a year, and the employer often say that this is because they are not productive enough. On the other hand, sheltered work is considered often more as part of therapy then meaningful work. In the art scene there is mostly worked with non disabled bodies and they prefer that. Inclusive art is seen as something non-profit, not for professionals, as part of a therapy etc.

With the way the Wajong system is set up you're always trapped in dependence. Inclusive arts should be taken seriously as a potential profession activity for people with no arbeidsvermogen assed for the Wajong. However, the way recognition of inclusive art on its artistic merit is still lacking in the Netherlands. This means that inclusive arts organisations are often treated as amature

performance company providing art therapy to performers. The lack of governmental support or interest in inclusive art means that national or local funding is difficult to come by. The consequence of this is that the status of inclusive art organisations like Misiconi is unclear. In applying for government or other philanthropical and community grants, we are often categorised as a disability care organisation, rather than professional art company.

The importance of inclusive art goes well beyond a charitable act of providing art therapy. It would be helpful to think of disabled bodies not as 'lacking', but as differently-abled bodies, and what they are capable of doing beyond purely economic terms. Inclusive art is important, because bodily diversity adds to artistic expression and creativity. Inclusive art moves people, and it deserves real recognition and appreciation. This will also help correct distorted and stereotypical representation of people with disability often seen in the mainstream media. A mature and just society is the one in which inclusive art, as a form of diversity, is not only accepted and celebrated, but seen as just a 'normal' form of art to appreciate. In order to realise this, there needs to be a major shift in the way resources are allocated, and to our collective mindset. One way of doing this is by encouraging an ideology of inclusive society through awareness raising in education, community and workplaces. However, as important as it is, Government's effort for 'job creation' needs to go beyond asking the private sector and government offices to accept high arbeidsvermogen and providing meaningful job opportunities for people with lower arbeidsvermogen. Within the art scene this needs to be done from amature level onto professional level to create more collaborative and accessible environment where people with bodily diverse potentials in all kinds regardless of medical definition can work together.