

March 1989

Marginal Women Unite! Organizing the DisAbleD Womens Network in Canada

Sharon D. Stone
York University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Gender and Sexuality Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Stone, Sharon D. (1989) "Marginal Women Unite! Organizing the DisAbleD Womens Network in Canada," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1886>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol16/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

Marginal Women Unite! Organizing the DisAbled Women's Network in Canada*

SHARON D. STONE

York University
Department of Sociology

This paper discusses the Disabled Women's Network's (DAWN) history, issues, goals, structure, organizing tactics and ongoing problems. DAWN is an example of the ability of oppressed people to organize and advocate for their rights against overwhelming odds.

Canadian disabled women are getting "uppity!" Over the years, disabled women have become increasingly frustrated with being treated as second class citizens, and have taken steps to ensure that their needs and specific concerns are addressed. In 1983, for example, two women from COPOH (Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped) attended the annual general meeting of Canada's largest feminist organization, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) "to establish liaison between NAC and . . . COPOH" (Kome, 1983, p. 78), and begin the groundwork needed to bring the concerns of disabled women to the fore. In 1985, women at the annual COPOH conference met and brought forward two resolutions. "One called for a half day workshop to be held on women's issues at the next conference and the other called for an investigation of women's participation within the COPOH structure" (D'Aubin, 1987, p. 1).

Also in 1985, four disabled women activists met with representatives of the Secretary of State Women's Program to discuss the possibility of organizing a national meeting of disabled women to discuss their issues (the Secretary of State took the initiative to call this meeting). They developed "a plan to con-

*I would like to thank Joanne Doucette for providing me with some of the information in this paper.

vene a small group of women in late Spring, to examine options for collective action" (Pelletier, 1985, p. 2). This meeting led to the formation of the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN).

In this paper, I discuss DAWN's history, issues and goals, structure, organizing tactics and ongoing problems. My intent is primarily descriptive, although I also argue that DAWN's existence is an example of the ability of oppressed peoples to organize and advocate for their rights, even against overwhelming odds.

Getting Organized

In May, 1985, one of the women who had been at the meeting called by the Secretary of State Women's Program met with three other disabled women activists to draw up an agenda and compose a list of potential delegates for the national meeting. They selected delegates based on their ability to empower others to organize, and involvement in disabled women's issues. Regional and minority representation was sought, as well as women who represented cross disabilities. These four also met with a representative of the Secretary of State Women's Program to finalize the grant application.

The Secretary of State representative then worked almost full-time to prepare for the meeting, and finalized the attendance list. Two nondisabled women were hired to assist with the planning, chairing and reporting. The four day meeting was scheduled for June, 1985 in Ottawa.

Called the "Women with Disabilities Networking Meeting," the event brought together 17 women representing a variety of disabilities, and representing all 10 provinces as well as the North West Territories. The delegates agreed to form the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN). A core committee of eight was formed (selection based on whether a delegate had access to a computer to communicate with others) to coordinate activities. All delegates agreed to return home to organize local and/or provincial networks of disabled women. DAWN Canada was born.

After that meeting, DAWN groups began to form around the country. Disabled women first met in Prince Edward Island in July, 1985, promoting DAWN in a radio interview. DAWN Toronto first met in September, 1985. Later DAWN Ottawa was

formed. DAWN Halifax met and presented a brief to the provincial government on disabled women's issues. DAWN Montreal (*L'Action des femmes handicapées*) became active, holding monthly meetings and a self-defense course. In March, 1986, DAWN British Columbia (B.C.) had its founding conference, attended by 50 women. In Manitoba, the Consulting Committee on the Status of Women with Disabilities (CCSWD), although not formally a DAWN member, early linked with DAWN to share information and cooperate on common concerns. In November, 1986, 72 women met to found DAWN Ontario. To date, DAWN groups have yet to form in Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, the North West Territories and the Yukon.

Except for infrequently exchanged letters between groups, communication between delegates to the Ottawa meeting soon broke down (due primarily to a lack of follow-up funding). All the original delegates never met again, but in May, 1986, four of them (one from DAWN B.C., one from DAWN Montreal, and two from DAWN Toronto) attended a NAC conference, and discussed the necessity of getting funding for another national meeting. They met with representatives of the Secretary of State Disabled Persons' Participation Program (the Women's Program was no longer directly involved) to discuss plans and apply for funding.

Funding was not received until four months later. In November, 1986, they met again to further plans for a second national meeting. A fifth woman (from CCSWD) who had been at the original Ottawa meeting was included in this ad hoc planning committee. The date was set for February, 1987 and the meeting was to be hosted by DAWN Toronto.

Also in November, however, DAWN Toronto hosted the DAWN Ontario conference. The work of organizing that conference was shouldered by only two DAWN Toronto members—the same two who volunteered to organize the national meeting. The tremendous amount of work proved to be too much, and as a result, one of these women became ill (the illness lasted several months). The Toronto group was therefore unable to continue as host of the event. In January, 1987, CCSWD agreed to host the meeting in Winnipeg.

In March, 1987, the ad hoc committee dissolved as 20 dis-

abled women gathered for DAWN Canada's second national meeting in Winnipeg (delegates represented the North West Territories and all 10 provinces). To coordinate DAWN Canada's activities, they elected a Board of Directors representing the various regions of the country, a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. A constitution and by-laws were passed. As with the first national meeting, delegates agreed to return home to work for the birth and/or development of local and provincial DAWN groups.

Issues and Goals

In general, DAWN works for the full equality and integration of disabled women into the mainstream of Canadian society. DAWN also seeks, like other minority action groups such as those composed of blacks or natives, to foster a sense of identity and pride in members. This positive sense of identity and consciousness can be difficult to sustain within male-dominated organizations, or organizations dominated by nondisabled feminists. Disabled women need their own organization, their own space, just as nondisabled women need to meet separately from men: "That's why groups run by and for women are so important to us. They are our psychic turf; our place to discover who we are, or could become, as whole independent human beings" (Steinem, 1986, p. 231).

Disabled women are doubly oppressed. As disabled people, they are denied things most people take for granted, such as employment, accessible housing or transportation. As women, they are oppressed by a sexist society. Asch and Fine (1988a, p. 15) suggest that "the disabled woman may be viewed as more dangerous than a similarly disabled male, more morally suspect, or more deserving of her fate."

Disabled women have concerns not shared by disabled men. For example, studies indicate that the incidence of violent assault against disabled women (incest, child abuse, wife assault, rape or medical assault) are much higher than among nondisabled women (Aschand Fine, 1988a; Doucette, 1987; Kome, 1983).

One experience that most women want is to become mothers, and disabled women want it too. Sexuality, menstruation, contraception, pregnancy and childbirth all have social as well as medical

complications for disabled women. Sexuality tends to be inconvenient for institutions. Disabled women have been sterilized surgically without their knowledge and/or consent, or injected with Depo-Provera, the three-month contraceptive that stops menstruation completely (less fuss) but has been linked with sterility and cervical cancer. . . . [Nor is it] uncommon to see hysterectomies performed on girls of 12 or 13 for hygienic reasons (Kome, 1983, p. 80).

At DAWN's founding meeting, six broad issues were selected for focus: (a) accessibility to the women's movement and women's services; (b) violence against disabled women; (c) affirmative action; (d) assertiveness, awareness and self-image; (d) sexuality (choice, homophobia, reproductive rights); and (e) parenting and child care (see Pelletier, 1985, p. 21–30).

Also, delegates produced a list of actions necessary to build DAWN. They needed to build grassroots links between disabled women, raise the consciousness of disabled women, educate the feminist and disabled consumer movements, lobby politicians, develop local groups, reach out to rural and urban women as well as ethno-cultural minorities, engage in peer support, share skills, gather and distribute information, and undertake their own research projects (Pelletier, 1985, pp. 31–32). They agreed that, upon returning home, they would contact local women's groups regarding accessibility, contact disabled consumer groups asking them to survey women's groups for accessibility, write letters and articles about the status of disabled women, lobby disabled consumer groups regarding women's issues, and establish local DAWN groups and local forums for disabled women to discuss their concerns and interests (Pelletier, 1985, pp. 33–34).

In its brochure, DAWN Toronto translated these priorities into the following goals:

- (a) to make women's services and the women's movement accessible to all disabled women;
- (b) to be a bridge between the disabled consumer movement and the women's movement;
- (c) to be role models for disabled girls;
- (d) to address the issues of affirmative action, poverty, violence, parenting, sexuality, health, etc.;

- (e) to do outreach to all disabled women, including native women, black women, Asian women, south Asian women, and other women of colour, immigrant women, lesbians, women in institutions and single parents;
- (f) to work in coalition with others who share our concern for social justice;
- (g) to provide information on disabled women and our concerns; and,
- (h) to be the voice of disabled women.

Implementing the Goals

Originally, DAWN was to operate as a collective. Rather than a hierarchical organization with formal positions, DAWN was envisioned as a network of equals. To function, however, networks require constant communication amongst members. And as mentioned above, communication after the Ottawa meeting soon broke down. In retrospect, an observation from that meeting appears ominous: "It is remarkable that often, networks fail because members neglect the most basic, elementary factor in the life of a network: feeding information into the system" (Pelletier, 1985, p. 39).

Several local groups discovered that the collective approach did not work for them. At DAWN Toronto (approximately 60 members) and DAWN Montreal (approximately 15 members), for example, one or two women found themselves doing all of the work without formal recognition, and no one was accountable to anyone else. This led to frustration and burnout (see Fisher, 1986).

It also led to a phenomenon well-known amongst feminists who attempt to work in collectives—the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1973). In her important article, Freeman argued that there is no such thing as a structureless group working for social change. All such groups have leaders, even when leaders are not formally recognized as such. She argued that hidden leadership is more manipulative and less democratic than formal, visible leadership. She urged groups to adopt formal structures to make leaders accountable, and called for the distribution of authority.

During DAWN's first year, there was no formal leadership. Instead, power was concentrated in the hands of those who did

the most work, and those workers were acutely uncomfortable with both the workload and the power. This situation was in opposition to the original intent of empowering other disabled women and sharing responsibilities. DAWN Toronto addressed the problem by electing a Board of Directors, and adopting a constitution and by-laws in 1986, on its first anniversary. DAWN Montreal did the same. DAWN B.C. and DAWN Ontario bypassed the problem by holding elections at their initial meetings.

Meetings are key to DAWN's success. Whether at the local level (in monthly meetings) or at the provincial and national levels (in semi-annual or annual meetings), meetings are essential for DAWN to develop goals, strategy and policy. More than anything else, they help foster a sense of group identity and pride. They are fundamental for consciousness-raising and empowerment. As remarked after the 1986 DAWN B.C. conference:

The conference was very powerful. It was the first time that disabled women had a chance to talk with other women about . . . intimate topics. . . . Several of the women who participated spoke of the importance of having their experiences and feelings validated (Pollock and Meister, 1986).

Another wrote after the 1987 DAWN B.C. conference:

What happens to a disabled woman attending her first conference of DAWN . . . ? For me, it was culture shock. Instead of being the only special needs person in my household and immediate neighbourhood, I was just one of many. That at first was scary, but within hours it became liberating as I began to feel the bonds of unity and the stocks of shared interest. Now I am a part rather than apart (Brooks, 1987, p. 4).

Meetings and the ability to meet are often taken for granted by nondisabled people. Yet, for disabled women, even monthly meetings are significant achievements to be celebrated. Socially and physically isolated, disabled women must work hard just to meet. They must consider the logistics of transportation, attendant care, sign language interpretation and other special needs, services such as child care, and the expense.

In Toronto, for example, where DAWN meets monthly, disabled people who rely on public transit must book one week in advance for a special bus to pick them up and return them home.

Last minute changes to meeting date or time are therefore impossible. Nor is there any guarantee that a bus will arrive at the specified time, or arrive at all. Those who are able to negotiate crowds and stairs prefer to use the regular transit system. There is also the problem of poor health, which forces some to attend meetings only sporadically when they would rather attend regularly.

Member Recruitment

At the 1987 DAWN Canada meeting, delegates discussed promoting membership. Ideally, they wanted every disabled woman in the country to be aware of DAWN. They realized, however, that this was easier said than done, especially since they lacked funds for publicity and outreach.

In Toronto, DAWN advertises meetings in a local women's newsletter. Services and organizations for women as well as those for disabled people have been asked to tell disabled women about DAWN. Also, DAWN Toronto has a brochure distributed at events such as International Women's Day celebrations. In spite of these outreach efforts, however, most members are recruited through personal contact.

It is difficult to draw in isolated women. Disabled women tend not to go to public events (few are accessible) so do not get to hear or read about DAWN. Also, disabled women often tend to be extremely passive. Socialized into a situation of learned helplessness, many are unaware of their rights, or if they are aware, are afraid to assert themselves. They learn not to ask questions or express displeasure with the status quo. This means, for example, that they are unlikely to telephone an agency to ask about groups for women (for moving accounts of how and why disabled women learn to keep quiet and appear grateful, see Rooney and Israel, 1985).

Learned passivity means that when women do come to a DAWN meeting, they are likely to sit back and let others do the work. Self-confidence is so low that it is often difficult even to find volunteers to telephone others about an upcoming meeting. At the 1985 Ottawa meeting, one delegate declared that she was "overwhelmed about how to organize at home" (Pelletier, 1985, p. 36). At the DAWN Ontario conference, a delegate expressed her reluctance to help others organize, while another expressed

resentment at the expectation that she would return home to organize a DAWN group (Doucette, 1986b).

Member recruitment is hampered by DAWN's support for minorities, and in particular, the visible presence of lesbians and natives. At the DAWN Ontario conference, two delegates left because lesbians were allowed to speak about their concerns. Later, a large charity challenged DAWN Ontario's claim to be role models for disabled girls, since lesbians were members. The most bitter disappointment came, however, when delegates to a CCSWD conference in May, 1987 rejected the motion to join DAWN Canada (which means that although some CCSWD members support DAWN, a DAWN group remains to be officially formed in Manitoba). At that conference, some disliked the inclusion of minority rights on DAWN's agenda. Racist and homophobic remarks were openly expressed towards the natives and lesbians present. Many were reluctant to join an organization which they perceived to be too radical and a front for lesbians (personal communication). As Hooks (1984, p. 23) has observed: "Large numbers of women see feminism as synonymous with lesbianism; their homophobia leads them to reject association with any group identified as pro-lesbian."

DAWN is an explicitly feminist organization, and this scares many disabled women. For example, one delegate to the 1985 Ottawa meeting refused to call herself a feminist, preferring the term "humanist." Also, a large number of women active in the disabled consumer movement would rather work on relatively safe issues that affect all disabled people, such as transportation and accessibility, than threaten men by talking about issues such as violence against women. Regarding disabled women who do not identify as feminist, Rooney (1985, p. 66) said:

Their priority is the rights of disabled people, not women's rights or the rights of women within the disabled movement. Several of the women I've talked to seemed to me, and I heard through the grapevine about others, afraid of the term 'feminism,' even though they live their lives in ways that are very feminist.

Funding

Funding is a problem for any social change group, and for disabled women the problem is severe. Private donors, if at all

interested in disabled people (and few are), are more inclined to give money to "respectable" people (i.e., men) such as wheelchair athlete Rick Hansen, who raised money for the "worthy" cause of spinal cord research.

Local monthly meetings are not that expensive. If special services are required, volunteers can usually be relied upon to donate a few hours of their time. Provincial or national meetings, on the other hand, are extremely expensive. In addition to the costs associated with organizing any conference, such as building rental, there are expenses such as special services and transportation. Most nondisabled conference organizers expect their delegates to pay for their own transportation and accommodation, but this expectation is unrealistic for disabled women.

Disabled women are among the poorest of the poor. In a survey of DAWN Ontario members, 74% had annual incomes of less than \$11,000, while 50% received less than \$5,000 annually (Doucette, 1987). Unless given money to get to a conference, few disabled women are able to attend.

Attendance numbers at conferences are more a reflection of how much money is available, than an indication of interest. For example, the 1985 Ottawa meeting which brought together only 17 disabled women, cost \$25,000 excluding the salary of the Secretary of State organizer. The DAWN Ontario conference, which was organized by volunteers, cost \$45,000. Funding for that conference came from the provincial government (Ontario Women's Directorate, the Directorate for Disabled Persons, and the Ministry of Community and Social services). For the 1986 DAWN B.C. conference, funding was provided by the federal government (the Health Promotion Directorate of Health and Welfare Canada, and the Secretary of State Department).

Without government funding, it would be impossible for DAWN to organize conferences. It would also be impossible to undertake research projects, such as the survey of DAWN Ontario members for a report on violence against disabled women (Doucette, 1987). To date, DAWN has been fortunate that the government is showing interest in disabled women. There is no guarantee, however, that this interest will continue. If it disappears, DAWN will be in serious trouble.

Dawn and Others

Feminists

In the early years of the current wave of feminism, activists largely ignored the specific oppressions of minority women, including disabled women. Even today, feminists are slow to take notice of disabled women:

If the National Action Committee on the Status of Women can be seen as representing mainstream feminism in Canada, then the absence of disabled women is almost total. This indicates a critical need for able-bodied Canadian feminists to start examining disability issues and their own prejudices against people with disabilities (Tait, 1986, p. 447).

By and large, the feminist movement and women's services have not been accessible to disabled women and, until recently, have shown little awareness of the need for accessibility or little inclination to do anything towards opening their doors. For example, CCSWD (1986) surveyed women's organizations in Winnipeg, finding that when the needs of hearing, visually or mobility impaired women were taken into consideration, not one was accessible. Women's groups and services have a multitude of excuses for why they are not accessible, chiefly centered around funding. "It is a fact that many women's organizations are underfunded but . . . statistics very clearly show the LOW priority given to the needs of visually and hearing impaired women" (Tait, 1986, p. 10).

The lack of accessibility to women's services prompted DAWN Toronto to write an open letter to the feminist movement. It says, in part:

At this point, maybe your heads are shaking and your finance committee is yelling, "IT'S NOT COST EFFECTIVE." (Perhaps the rest of you are simply saying, "It's too expensive").

BEING DISABLED HAS NEVER BEEN COST EFFECTIVE AND IT NEVER WILL BE. The same school of nonthought that calmly slaughtered millions of Jews, feminists, socialists, gays and lesbians and other minorities, fed us disabled people to the ovens because we "cost too much." Right here, today, in Canada, disabled women are being sterilized without consent because we

"cost too much." The same argument is used to deny us jobs, decent incomes, housing, health care and everything the nondisabled take for granted—because it "costs too much."

But costs too much to whom? Why?

So forgive us if we retch when we hear the same argument from feminist groups who have not put accessibility at the top of their agenda. And don't tell us that we're unreasonable, bitter, twisted and even strident when you shut us out and can't cope with our rage (Doucette, 1986a).

This letter was widely circulated. It was reprinted in several women's newsletters. The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women reprinted it in an attractive manner and included it as a separate piece in a regular mailing to members. NAC reprinted it in its newsletter and also distributed it to delegates at the annual meeting in 1987. It remains to be seen, however, whether it will have any meaningful effect.

While more organizations are making efforts, the history of inaccessibility, lack of understanding and unwillingness to prioritize access leaves many disabled women angry and disillusioned. Many other women become acutely uncomfortable with their anger. An angry disabled woman defies and confounds stereotyping and expectations.

Abortion rights, or freedom of choice, has been a rallying call for the modern feminists, and many disabled women actively support a woman's right to choose. Yet the insensitivity of many abortion rights activists towards disabled people has aroused criticism. An American disabled activist, for example, saw feminists as ". . . quick to take a knee-jerk stand in opposition to right-wing and anti-abortion forces, without considering it from the perspective of a disabled person" (Anne Finger in McDonnell, 1984, p. 89).

Finger is not alone in her mistrust of pro-choice activists. Indeed, many disabled women are drawn to the anti-abortion movement because it believes ". . . that to allow abortion cheapens the value of human life and opens the door to active mercy-killing, infanticide and a general readiness to dispose of "unproductive" or "undesirable" elements in society (McDonnell, 1984, p. 90).

Feminists have not proven eager to embrace their disabled sisters. Increasingly, they are willing to include disabled women in their coalitions (DAWN is a member of the Canadian Coalition on Depo-Provera, the Pay Equity Coalition, NAC, and in Toronto, has been part of International Women's Day Planning Committees). In NAC, a DAWN member was on the 1986/87 Board of Directors. Even so, disabled women often seem to be included as token afterthoughts.

It has been suggested that because feminists are very aware of how fragile their newly-won status is, they are less than eager to share privileges with other minorities (Tait, 1986, p. 448-449). Fighting to free themselves from the role of sex-bunny, mother or virgin on a pedestal, they have yet to expand the image of woman wide enough to include those different from their physical norm. "Feminists are not immune from . . . feelings of discomfort and rejection directed toward a person who looks or walks or talks 'differently.' [Feminists] remain trapped in a restrictive and restricting image of the body" (Tait, 1986, p. 450). Some feminists say that physical disability or deformity revolts and nauseates them (personal observations). Others, focusing their lives on careers, competition and achievement, proving that they "have what it takes" to succeed, are threatened by the presence of mentally or physically disabled women. Their very existence denies the premise that all women need is an equal chance to compete.

Thus, disabled women have reason to be uncomfortable with feminists, while feminists are all too often uncomfortable with disabled women.

Disabled Men

While many DAWN members also belong to disabled consumer groups, and DAWN actively seeks to work with the disabled consumer movement, here too there are serious problems.

By and large, it is men who are in decision-making positions within the disabled consumer movement. Disabled women activists are too often seen as helpers. Even at disabled rights conferences, women have a hard time getting men to listen to or validate their concerns. For example, at the 1985 Disabled People's International (DPI) conference in the Bahamas, attended

by Canadian women, a scheduled women's plenary was cancelled at the last minute. At the time, women had to struggle just to gain access to the microphone on the floor.

Traditionally, men have seen women as extensions or complements to themselves. Many assume women's lives center on the domestic sphere of kitchen and children, or trivial "women's stuff": make-up, fashion, fluffy curtains. Many disabled men, including some leading the disabled consumer movement, share this inability to see that disabled women have unique concerns. For example, the male editor of the B.C. Coalition of the Disabled's newsletter, *Transition*, wrote: "I never imagined that the views of disabled women and men were separate and antagonistic. This is our frustration with the able-bodied community, not with each other" (Watson 1985, p. 2).

Some disabled men are acutely uncomfortable with the idea of disabled women acting independently. Within COPOH, for example, a women's caucus has been formed, but men demanded and won the right to belong to the caucus. This, of course, defeats the purpose of a women's caucus. Disabled men have sometimes reacted to the idea of DAWN with anxiety and hostility. Some see DAWN as splitting the disabled consumer movement politically, thus reducing its impact. Watson (1985) continues:

So apparently to share experience with the male disabled population is not the intention of the newly formed Disabled [sic] Women's Network. . . . Disabled women of British Columbia cannot expect me, representing the male population, to understand women's issues or support their efforts.

Another disabled man wrote, "I was overcome by some strong feelings [when reading that] 'Men will not be welcome to attend,' " He accused DAWN members of "coldness and anger," drawing a comparison to "the righteous [sic] anger of the late sixties and early seventies feminist movement." He concluded by saying:

The women of DAWN B.C. have the opportunity to start fresh. An opportunity to show the world that *men and women can work together with love*, respect and support for the betterment of disabled women, men, and all disabled people. I implore the women in-

volved in DAWN B.C. to avoid the pitfalls of their able-bodied sisters . . . so as to *create an organization that can deal with the problems of all disabled people* (Elliott, 1986, pp. 5–6, emphasis added).

Elliott was correct to compare the women who formed DAWN to the feminists who became disillusioned with the new left in the sixties. They are having a remarkably similar experience (see Evans, 1979). It is as if history is repeating itself, and no lessons have been learned.

It must be stressed that DAWN was not formed to attack the sexism of disabled men. DAWN was formed to allow disabled women to concentrate on issues which concerned them AS WOMEN. DAWN is not interested in taking over the male-dominated consumer movement, but in complementing it. Advocating female separatism, as Hooks (1984, pp. 70–71) points out, is not necessarily equivalent to taking an anti-male stance.

Disabled Women Helping Themselves

It may surprise some people that disabled women are capable of organizing in their own interest. It is, after all, common to assume that disabled women are helpless. The most popular image is of someone "confined" to a wheelchair. This image says a great deal. To be confined is to be imprisoned or restricted. The image is of a pitiful individual whose life revolves around and is limited to a wheelchair. Yet, wheelchair users are no more "confined" to wheelchairs than drivers are "confined" to automobiles. Just as drivers use their cars to get around, women in wheelchairs use their vehicles to get around. It is more appropriate to speak of women using wheelchairs, since this clearly allows for the conception of self-determined action. Women using wheelchairs can decide to do something other than simply sit in their vehicles. "In fact, humans are nearly infinitely adaptable" (Stone, 1984, p. 189).

Women using wheelchairs are often assumed to be mentally incompetent. They are often patronized, or praised as truly remarkable when they show signs of intelligence and initiative. Using a wheelchair, however, does not prevent one from thinking or acting. A DAWN Toronto member, who recently died, had osteogenesis imperfecta. Yet this did not prevent her from

working hard for the rights of disabled women, including speaking out publicly. Many nondisabled people treated her as a precocious child. She was seen as remarkable because she was a *disabled* woman who did not simply sit "confined" to her wheelchair. She was not, on the whole, seen as remarkable because she was a *woman* with a unique personality.

Another common assumption is that all disabled women, if not "confined" to a wheelchair or using crutches, must be either deaf or blind (deafness and blindness also seem to be grounds for assuming mental incompetence). These are the only "valid" grounds for claiming the status of disabled according to the popular mind. This denies the reality of the countless women who have mobility problems not immediately apparent, have chronic or severe pain, or have other invisible disabilities such as epilepsy or heart disease (on living with invisible disabilities, see Charmaz, 1986; Koolish, 1986; Lloyd, 1987; Stone, 1984). In fact, disability is manifested in a myriad of ways. Although some disabilities are more severe than others, all disabled women are in some way prevented from living to the fullest in a world which chooses to marginalize them.

Disablement is not considered by disabled activists to be situated in a physical condition or difference *per se*, although this has been the medical model of disability, accepted uncritically by the general public. As V. Finkelstein argues (in Stone, 1984, p. 26): "It is not the fact that [a person] cannot walk that is disabling but that society is organized for walking and not wheel-chair-using individuals. [A person's] disability is not paraplegia but steps, pavement kerbs, buses and prejudiced shopkeepers."

Also, Asch and Fine (1988b: 299) have noted: "Millions of citizens with biological limitations would assert that their main obstacles to fulfilling lives stem not from these limitations but from a society that stresses mental and physical perfection and rugged individualism . . ." Others argue that "poverty and the low status of women are major contributors to disablement" (Tate and Weston, 1982, p. 222).

Disabled women, despite the fact that many of them are able and willing to work, are virtually excluded from the paid labour force due to prejudice, stereotyping and an unwillingness to accommodate special needs. Further, just as when employers

decide to hire minorities, they would rather hire a black man than a black woman, they would rather hire a disabled man than a disabled woman. No one knows for sure the unemployment rate for disabled women, but guesses are as high as 93% (Doucette, 1986c; see also O'Leary, 1983).

Disabled women are among the most marginalized people in society. We live in a society which both devalues women in general and is designed for able-bodied people only. Given this, it is a tribute to the tenacity of disabled women that they have been able to sustain the momentum necessary for building DAWN.

The creation and maintenance of DAWN is also an indication of the seriousness of the problems daily confronting disabled women. DAWN speaks to and validates the concerns of disabled women. For example, when women who have full use of their bodies are afraid of violence, imagine how much more afraid are women who do not have full use of their bodies. There are few disabled women not constantly reminded of how vulnerable they are to attack. And, as Doucette (1987) has found, a majority of disabled women have experienced attack. DAWN tells these women they are not alone, that they do not deserve such violence, and that they can do something about it.

In contemporary social theory, there is a popular model purporting to explain the rise of social movements as a function of resources available, called resource mobilization theory. McAdam (1982, p. 31) explains: "In some cases the claim is direct: deprived segments of the population simply lack the resources to generate and sustain social insurgency."

In his discussion of the American civil rights movement, McAdam documents "the indigenous origins of an insurgent challenge that developed among a group . . . that by any standards would have to be adjudged deprived" (McAdam, 1982, p. 31). He argues, in part, that the ability of southern blacks to organize was facilitated by the existence of networks of communication. In assigning importance to communications networks, he echoed theorists such as Freeman (1975, p. 66), who pointed out that "preexisting communications networks appear to be not merely valuable but prerequisites" for the rise and spread of a social movement.

In considering the growth of DAWN, I emphasize the ob-

servations of these theorists. It is difficult to conceive how DAWN could have been born without the preexistence of the disabled consumer movement and the feminist movement. Both allowed disabled women to meet each other and find their voices. Thus, when disabled women began looking for others to attend the 1985 Ottawa meeting, they were able to draw in women they already knew from their involvement in these movements. Without those preexisting networks, disabled women might have had a hard time finding their voice, or the courage to speak their minds. As it turned out, disabled women have proven that even the most oppressed groups are capable of challenging and resisting their oppressors.

References

- Asch, A. and Fine, M. (1988a). Introduction: Beyond pedestals. In M. Fine and A. Asch (Eds.), *Women with disabilities: Essays in psychology, culture, and politics*, pp. 1–37. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . (1988b). *Shared dreams: A left perspective on disability rights and reproductive rights*. In M. Fine and A. Asch (Eds.), *Women with disabilities: Essays in psychology, culture, and politics*, pp. 297–305. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Brooks, E. (1987). *Culture shock at DAWN*. Kinesis, (April).
- Charmaz, K. (1986). Living with invisible disabilities. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting, New York.
- Consulting Committee on the Status of Women with Disabilities [CCSWD]. (1986). *Equal access and equal opportunity for women with disabilities*.
- D'Aubin, A. (1987). *Disabled women's issues: A COPOH discussion paper*. Winnipeg: Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped.
- DisAbleD Women's Network [DAWN] Toronto. Brochure (no date).
- Doucette, J. (1986a). An Open Letter from the DisAbleD Women's Network, DAWN Toronto to the Women's Movement.
- . (1986b). *DAWN Ontario Networking conference report. The future is now: Networking for change*. Toronto: DAWN Toronto.
- . (1986c). Disability, women and employment: Defining the scrap heap. (Unpublished manuscript).
- . (1987). *Violent acts towards disabled women*. Toronto: DAWN Toronto.
- Elliott, B. (1986). Letter to the editor. *Transition*, (July–August).
- Evans, S. (1979). *Personal politics: The roots of Women's liberation in the civil rights movement and the new left*. NY: Vintage Books.
- Fisher, B. (1986). Over the long haul: Burnout and hope in a conservative era. *Frontiers*, 8 (3), 1–7.
- Freeman, J. (1973). The tyranny of structurelessness. In A. Koedt, Levine, E., and Rapone, A. (Eds.), *Radical feminism*. NY: Quadrangle Books.
- . (1975). *The politics of women's liberation*. NY: Longman.

- Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- Kome, P. (1983). Women and disabilities. *Homemaker's Magazine* (September), 78-85.
- Koolish, L. (1986). We are the canaries: Women, disability and coalition building. Paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Lloyd, B. (1987). My story, our story: Giving voice to invisible disability. *Healthsharing*, 8 (4), 26-28.
- McAdam, D. (1982). *Political process and the development of black insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- McDonnell, K. (1984). *Not an easy choice: A feminist re-examines abortion*. Toronto: The Women's Press.
- O'Leary, J. M. (1983). Disabled women and employment. *Rehabilitation Digest*, 14 (5), 7-10.
- Pelletier, J. (1985). *Report: Women with disabilities networking meeting*. Ottawa: Convergence Consultants.
- Pollock, M. and Meister, J. (1986). DAWN B.C. conference a success. *Transition*, (May).
- Rooney, F. (1985). The Issue is ability. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 14 (1), (March), 64-68.
- Rooney, F. and Pat Israel (Eds.). (1985). Women and disability [Special issue]. *Resources for Feminist Research*, 14 (1), (March).
- Steinem, G. (1986). *Outrageous acts and everyday rebellions*. NY: New American Library.
- Stone, D. A. (1984). *The disabled state*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Tait, J. J. (1986). Reproductive technology and the rights of disabled persons. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 1 (2), 446-455.
- Tate, D. G., and Weston, N. H. (1982). Women and disabilities: An international perspective. *Rehabilitation Literature*, 43, 7-8, 222-227.
- Watson, R. A. (1985). Male banished from workshop. *Transition*, (November).

