

DAWN TORONTO
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October 19, 1986

Dear feminist sisters:

D.A.W.N., or the DisAbled Women's Network, Toronto, is sending you an open letter from our members. We ask respectfully that you publish the attached letter in your newsletter, put it up on your bulletin, reproduce it for your members, discuss it in your collective or Board meetings, debate it, critique it, attack if (if you must), but do not ignore it.

We know many of you and your organizations have made solid efforts to be accessible to all women and we salute you!

Special thanks to the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Toronto Women's Bookstore, Herizons, Resources for Feminist Research and the OISE Women's Caucus, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre, Women's College Hospital, Side by Side, and all others who have fought for and struggled with accessibility. Our appreciation to the Secretary of State, Government of Canada, the Ontario Women's Directorate, the Ontario Secretariat for Disabled People, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, the City of Toronto, the Gay Community Appeal (for special outreach to disabled lesbians), and the individuals who have supported us with grants and donations.

We ask you, if possible, to NOT EDIT the Open Letter. Every word has been carefully thought through and any deletion would be missed. For most of you, this will be the first time you have really had a hard look at accessibility. Remember, eighteen per cent of all women are disabled. A little space for our Open Letter is, we feel, not too much to ask.

You may also publish this letter if you wish.

We thank you for your support.

Your disabled sisters in

The DisAbled Women's Network

P.S. Please note that DisAbled is intentionally spelled with a capital A: DisAbled.

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE DISABLED WOMEN'S NETWORK, D.A.W.N. TORONTO TO THE
WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Who would think of putting out a flyer
saying:

IMPORTANT FEMINIST EVENT FEATURING
MS. DARING DAISY, WELL KNOWN AUTHOR.
Nov. 30, 8:00 PM, Everywoman's Hall.
Admission FREE. Childcare. DISABLED
WOMEN NEED NOT APPLY.

Of course not!

Yet often, even usually, that's what
the publicity for feminist events says
to disabled women...and you, the group
responsible, may not know it, want it,
or expect it. Your intentions may be,
probably are (we hope) good. But we
all know what road is paved with good
intentions.

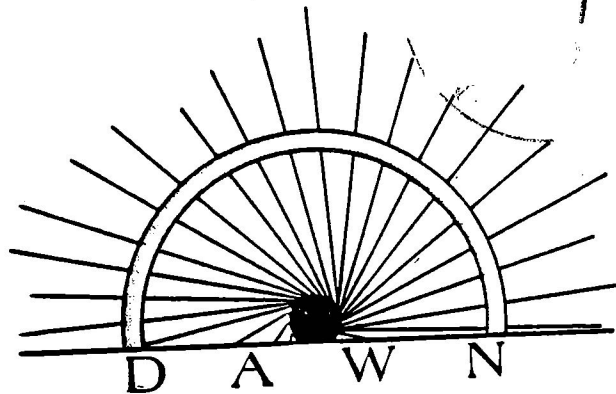
Your problem is usually that you just
plain don't know what accessibility is.
Our problem is that we can't get in to
even tell you.

Accessible means different things to
different people. WHAT FOLLOWS IS THE
BARE MINIMUM FOR ACCESSIBILITY FOR MOST
DISABLED WOMEN. AND REMEMBER DISABLED
WOMEN ARE 18 PER CENT OF ALL WOMEN.

For a woman who uses a wheelchair,
accessibility means no steps (a good
ramp and/or level entrance), an adapted
washroom (with grab bars, a sink that her
chair will fit under, room to get the
chair in the cubicle and make a transfer
sideways from the chair onto the toilet),
and a place to sit, preferably with her
friends.

For deaf and hearing impaired women,
access means sign language interpreters.
It means an office with a Telecommuni-
cations Device for the Deaf (TDD) or a
meeting with a loop amplification device.
(These things are not as expensive or
hard to get as you think. Just ask
your local DAWN group).

For blind and visually impaired women,
accessibility means having printed
matter (books, brochures, agendas, etc.)
on cassette tape, in large print, or,
sometimes in Braille. It means that her
Seeing Eye Dog is welcome and that you
don't pet or feed that dog (it's working)
without the owner's express permission.
It means you offer to guide a blind woman
to her seat. YOU DON'T GRAB HER BY THE



ARM AND DRAG HER THERE. That's not help;
it's assault.

For developmentally disabled women,
your attitude and language are the key
to accessibility. When was the last time
you jokingly referred to someone as "an
idiot, imbecile, space cadet"? While
we're on the subject, how do you think
severely mobility impaired women feel
about "basket case"? Or deaf women
about "dumb"? Or psychiatric survivors
about feminists who call other women
"crazy, nuts, looney tooners, or really
out of it"? Another cliché to watch is,
"Confined to a wheelchair". You don't
usually think of yourself as confined to
your car even though you are incapable
of travelling 50 miles an hour unaided.
Of course not, you drive your car. And
we use our wheelchairs (and crutches,
canes, walkers, etc.).

For most invisibly disabled women, those
whose disability you can't see, access is
often a matter of attitude and flexibility.
For a woman with epilepsy, it means no
strobe lights or flash bulbs. For a woman
with diabetes, it means nutrition breaks.
We thought non-disabled women liked to eat
too, but we have been to all day feminist
events where no lunch break was planned.
(Is this the planning of a workaholic?)

For women with environmental illnesses,
access means SMOKE FREE meetings and events.
Yes, Virginia, smoking is an equality
issue. If Mary dropped out of your
planning committee, it may mean that Mary
had an asthma attack after that last
meeting from your cigarette. Nice.

For some women accessibility means an
attendant to help her with her basic
needs. You will need to supply trained

attendants or she may want to bring her own attendant. If she does, the attendant should be admitted to the event free of charge. Even the Metro Zoo does this. An attendant is a technical aide in just the same way as a wheelchair is and no one charges two fares for a woman using a chair: one for herself and one for her wheelchair.

Even when events are accessible, you may not see disabled women out. This is often because of transportation. Wheeltrans, Toronto's alternative transit system, is separate from regular TTC, but it is certainly not equal. Wheeltrans users, for example, are not allowed to use Metropasses, but, even though we are the poorest of all women (even old age pensioners get more), we must pay full fare every time. And we must book at least 7 days in advance if we want to go somewhere. And that's no guarantee you'll get there... Or they might (often) get you there an hour late and pick you up an hour early. So much for spontaneity or last minute notice!

So disabled women may need a ride. Someone, somewhere, somewhen, please, PLEASE give DAWN our own wheelchair van. If there's a goddess out there...

Last, but never least, accessibility means publicity. Organizers in the women's movement rarely seem to think of publicizing events in the newspapers or on the phone lines of the disabled movement. If you want us at your event, or in your group, advertise where we read.

And when you advertise events, every event should have information about accessibility. If the event is not accessible to disabled women, it should say so. If it is, the symbols below should be used.



Be specific. For example, "Hallway wheelchair accessible. Bathroom not accessible." And consult with DAWN. We know what's accessible - and what it isn't. We know how to do it at the least expense and hassle. And we're happy to be asked. We may even know about funding if you ask us far enough in advance.

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 non-thought 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 non-disabled 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.

We must never, never, never shut any women out. All women are equal. All belong in the women's movement. Or it's all a BIG LIE. You need to deal with your problem of excluding us. We won't go away. We are your sisters. And we are organizing around the world! Soon the spectacle of disabled women picketing inaccessible women's events will become a reality. Every minority has a point when collectively we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. We are no exception. We are your sisters.

DAWN - for more info call
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Information available on cassette.