

ACCESSIBILITY

As Conference organizers we have learned from an omission in our own process. We wanted the conference to be attended by disabled women activists, and included wheelchair accessibility as part of our criteria for selecting the conference site. We did not however, seek advice from disabled women early in our planning about how to provide full accessibility. We were willing (if inexperienced) to find other forms of assistance for individuals, like signing and attendant care, but we didn't let people know this in our brochure. The consequence is that many disabled women activists who have a very particular interaction with the state will not be contributing to our discussions.

We are including a statement about accessibility from the Disabled Women's Network.

- The Conference Committee

WHAT IS ACCESSIBILITY AND HOW DO YOU MAKE IT HAPPEN?

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 P.M. Everywoman's Hall. Admission free. Child care. 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 wash-room (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 Telecommunications 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, loony tuners, or really out of it"? Another cliché to watch is, "Confined to a wheel-

chair". 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 to 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 there'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, sometime, please, **PLEASE** give **DAWN** our own wheelchair van. If there's a goddess out there...

Last, but never least, accessibility mean 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, "Hall wheelchair accessible. Bathroom not accessible." And consult with **DAWN**. We know what's accessible - and what 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.

For more information call D.A.W.N. in your province:

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