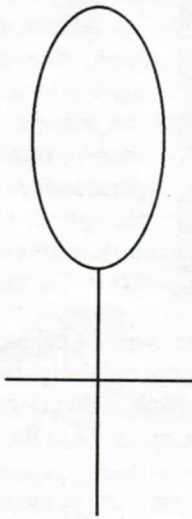
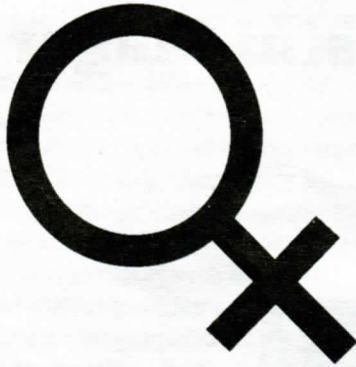


Differently Abled: A North-South Perspective

by Jackie Spoth



Perhaps my first glimpse of my privileged circumstance as a Canadian was 15 years ago when I saw all of the lame beggars thronging around Damascus gate of the old city of Jerusalem. I was studying at Hebrew University at the time and rolled by with my shiny wheelchair. Let me explain that I have a degenerative neuro-muscular disease and now I am spirited by a motorized wheelchair. A cadre of attendant caregivers provided by Independent Living Center, funded by the provincial government, enables me to live in the community and pursue my life's goals and choices.

More than 500 million people in the world are disabled as a consequence of mental, physical, or sensory impairments. The purpose of the World Programme of Action declared for the U.N. Decade of Disabled Persons 1983 ~ 1992 are to promote effective measures of prevention of disabilities, rehabilitation and realization of the goals of full participation and equality of disabled people in the social and economic development process in their countries.

In this rich nation we can justifiably be proud of our high tech advancements. Many disabled Canadians have found training and employment in the wonderful world of computers. But in fact all the technology of modern ingenuity can do less to improve the lives of disabled people than a change in the social attitudes which have been born from ignorance, indifference and fear of the non-disabled population. Social attitudes, whether internalized in public architecture and transport systems, can convert impairments into disabilities. For a person

who has polio, society can make the impairment to that of "not being able to earn a living." For a person who is deaf, misunderstanding can convert the impairment of not being able to hear into the disability of not being educated. Far from being a homogenous group, people with disabilities are not defined by disability, and have different barriers to overcome in different ways. As you begin to see blind PhD students as well as blind beggars, you see that blindness does not define the person.

There is no "blind person." Disabled people are different - as different as everybody else - as differently abled as you and I.

It has been proven that there is a direct correlation between poverty and disability and, in fact 80% of the disabled population lives in developing nations. Seventy percent of these people live in inaccessible rural areas where the family is the primary support. When the family economy is based on agriculture and when the traditional extended family exists, it is quite possible for even the most disabled person to be given some useful tasks to perform. But as more rural families move to urban centers, as agriculture becomes more mechanized and commercialized, as money transactions replace barter systems and as the institution of the extended family disintegrates, the vocational plight of disabled persons becomes more severe. In urban slums throughout the world the competition for any economically productive activity is heavy. Thus many disabled persons are abandoned to become dependent: others resort to begging.

As a physically-challenged feminist myself, I have experienced the doubly negative implications of being female and disabled in this patriarchal society.

Statistics reveal that women are exploited and oppressed as a class. Two out of three unlettered persons in the world are women. Indeed, although comprising one half of the world's population, one third of the official labor force, and performing nearly 2/3 of the work force, the women of the world receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of world property. The potent combination of low status of women in some developing countries and poverty's grim consequences is now acknowledged as a major cause of disability. Disabled women are even more likely to be financially marginalized, socially rejected, given diminished access to food, health care, vocational training and education.

Many of the disabilities that impact on the lives of women are preventable. Women who develop visual impairments as a result of occupations in the electronics industry, weaving and carpet making could have had such disabilities prevented if there were workplace, health, and safety laws in the host countries. The 74,000,000 women who have had their sexuality disabled from the practice of clitoridectomy would not have to suffer physical agony as a result of genital mutilation if patriarchal fears of women's sexuality could be calmed and women's rights to sexual fulfillment be recognized and accommodated. Western fears of the fertility of Developing World women have resulted in massive dumps of contraceptives and sterilization campaigns that have caustically violated, injured, and disabled the bodies of women in developing countries where there has been no concern to understand the cultural realities that dictates the necessity for women reproducing. It is a myth that poverty is caused by overpopulation. Poverty



results from unjust distribution of resources and wealth. Impairment of fertility can jeopardize a woman's place in the kinship network with the threat of divorce, thus placing a woman in an economically insecure state. Such anxieties give rise to mental illness, endemic to many Third World women.

When the food supply is meagre and limited, the priority that has long remained respected and unquestioned is always for the nutrition and health of the males of the family, the present and future breadwinners. By society's reckoning, women are considered to make little economic contribution - thus their unobtrusive place on the last rung of established priorities. Not at all considered are the number of domestic chores the woman is expected to accomplish to keep a home going, her own health needs which ultimately affects the children's, and her very dignity as a person which entitles her to the very same things in life that a man has. In certain parts of the world, a baby girl often receives only whatever food is left by her father and brothers. Difficult as this may seem to fathom, there are known cases of extreme poverty where children, again especially so when they are female, may be deliberately maimed so that they can be made to beg. These seemingly medieval practices weigh even more cruelly on disabled women who tend to age more rapidly when the harvest is meagre and food allotted for the exclusive use of the young and healthy.

For almost all women in the world, marriage is the primary means of economic survival as well as achievement of social status. Disabled women in developing countries are often hid-

den from view by their families, not only seen as unmarriageable but also as a curse to other marriageable siblings.

Today's disabled women in developed and developing countries must see their roles over and beyond traditional family settings and clan-ness. In self-help organizations of disabled persons, women are working to overcome the barriers that they face in their respective societies.

DAWN is a Canadian feminist organization comprised of disabled women and supporting other disabled women in their struggles to control their own lives. In the global struggle for reproductive freedom, DAWN and the *Namibian Women's Voice* have joined in protest to the use of Depo Provera. In solidarity, they have produced an informative booklet to raise consciousness of the issue. In over 80 countries around the world Depo Provera is given as a contraceptive to vulnerable women: Third World women, poor women, black women, and disabled women. Disabled women are in the target group in order to stop periods and prevent pregnancies often for no other reason than for the convenience of institutions and caregivers. This drug is often given without the woman's consent nor with information about the harmful effects of the drug.

While DAWN is a Canadian based organization, *Disabled Persons International* is a grassroots movement that works globally to empower the disabled. With members in over 70 countries DPI takes its mandate from the U.N. to promote human and economic rights of the disabled. It provides practical guidelines for providing a free environment where housing, transportation and employment, education and independent living are within the reach of all disabled.

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