

Girls and Women With Disabilities Speak Out

By Dinah Radtke

Disabled women are the most marginalised group in the whole world. There are more than 250 million of them today, with approximately 75 percent living in the so-called developing countries. Although they constitute a very large population, international development programmes rarely address the needs of disabled women or include them in community development ventures.

Of course, all persons with disabilities, whether male or female, have issues in common which affect them equally. Mostly, these concern the barriers in our environment like the lack of access to buildings and public transport, for example, or to bathroom facilities in public buildings, the lack of technical assistance and rehabilitation programmes, accessible information, the unavailability of sign-language interpreters and publications printed in braille, etc.

But women with disabilities have other important concerns besides these. These issues have to do with education, employment, achieving a self-determined lifestyle, violence, and the subject of euthanasia, eugenics and bioethics.

Education

Generally, the percentage of literacy amongst women is lower than amongst men in most countries. Women with disabilities have the lowest literacy rates of all, thus creating high unemployment and economic dependency. Many girls with disabilities are confronted with the traditional belief that girls do not have to learn so much because they will marry anyway and will have to look after a family; or, they will never marry anyway and therefore they do not need so much education.

It is a well known fact that often, these girls cannot count on getting married, that they have to rely on their own abilities to support them-

selves. This means that a good education is even more important for them. But even in the so-called industrialised countries, it is difficult for girls with disabilities to get training in as many professions as non-disabled girls. And in the so-called third world countries, such girls are often excluded from education, even from basic education, because of the gender aspect. The general opinion is that, it is important for boys, boys with disabilities, to get an education, but



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little thought is given to girls in the same situation. This is especially so in the rural areas.

During the last decade, many programmes have been developed to support special educational and professional training courses for girls and women with disabilities who are deaf, blind and learning impaired. But this is not enough. We need good education for all.

Employment

Getting a job is more difficult for women with disabilities than men with disabilities. This can be traced to the cultural attitude that it is more important for men to have a job. But this is not true. It is equally important for women to have a job and an income of their own, to support themselves and their children.

Some development agencies and the World Bank, for one, are giving micro-credits to train disabled girls and women to have their own income-generating project. We need far more programmes here, too.

Self-determined lifestyle

Severely disabled girls and women are often completely dependent on the help of others for their daily life. This dependency can create too much dependency on persons, mostly in the family, and restrict the woman in her activities. It can also lead to violence against girls and women

with disabilities. But most certainly dependency leads to low self-esteem and feelings of guilt.

We have to undertake advocacy and lobbying campaigns to popularise the importance of active support in the daily lives of women with disabilities. Instead of depending only on their families to help them, it would be preferable if the authorities could assign persons who will help them get out of bed, wash, dress, take their meals, go to school, take training courses, go to work, etc.

Violence

Statistics tell us that girls and women with disabilities are more likely to be sexually abused than those who are not. But this issue is a big taboo among the women themselves and in society. It is important to talk about violence, and not to be ashamed, because we cannot fight it unless we do so. We have to make it public, we have to inform people who might be able to help us. We should convince governments and non-governmental organisations to provide programmes to avoid violence and to provide shelter-homes so that girls and women with disabilities can escape the violence at home or in an institution and start a new life.

Euthanasia, Eugenics and Bioethics

Most women with disabilities believe that these issues do not concern them. But in reality it is them who suffer the most. First of all, when we talk about euthanasia, we deny that it exists. Women with disabilities, those who are elderly and chronically ill, are made to believe by their environment that they are a burden to their families and to society. That their life is useless. Because they are disabled, they are ill, they are old, they have pains, it is suggested to them that it would be better to die. This happens more commonly to the women than to the men, because disabled men have families (often an "abled" wife)

to care for them. We demand palliative care and services for these women to ensure a better quality of life.

Concerning eugenics, many women with disabilities are denied the right to have children out of fear that their children might be disabled as well. We are against forced sterilisation or abortion. We are against selecting the so-called abnormal foetuses (a woman should have the right to choose whether she wants to have the baby or not) and we are against infanticide on the ground of impairment. We demand that all children be welcomed into the world and provided with appropriate levels of social, practical and financial support.

Information on bioethics has been made available to many women with disabilities in the last few years, especially in Europe. We demand that the use of new genetic discoveries, techniques and practices be strictly regulated to avoid discrimination and to protect fully, and in all circumstances, the human rights of disabled people.

For this article I only want to highlight very briefly the most pressing issues concerning girls and women with disabilities. I must add, however, that in many countries, the isolation and confinement of such girls and women, based on culture and traditions, create even bigger

problems. This is another tragic form of discrimination.

DPI Women's Committee

Disabled Peoples International (DPI) is a human rights organisation working closely together with the United Nations. It co-operated with the UN in preparing the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Disabled Persons, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993.



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Getting a job is often difficult for women with disabilities

The Standard Rules are an instrument with which we can pressure governments to improve the situation of girls and women with disabilities in many countries. Their purpose is "to ensure that girls, boys, women and men with disabilities, as members of their societies, may exercise the same rights and obligations as others." Furthermore, "special attention may need to be directed towards groups such as women, children, the elderly, the poor, migrant workers, or persons with dual or multiple disabilities, indigenous people and ethnic minorities."

The DPI Women's Committee wants to raise awareness about the facts and issues I have mentioned. It is the committee's mandate, among others, to raise international awareness of the issues affecting women with disabilities, including human rights violations.

Other instruments we can use to improve the situation are the final documents of the Platform of Action of the Beijing Conference in 1995 and the final documents of the Beijing +5 conference held in New York in 2000. These documents mention women with disabilities several times with regard to education, employment, health and violence. (Let me tell you that it was hard work to convince the participants in these conferences of the necessity to mention women with disabilities especially.)

We need strong networks on all levels, to exchange information and to support each other. In DPI, for example, the DPI Women's Committee is subdivided into five regions. Each region has its own networks on the local, national and regional levels. Some of the women's networks are getting stronger and are working very well. In Europe, for example, there is a programme financed by the European Union (EU) to counter violence against women with disabilities. On 16-18 November this year we will

have a regional conference that will tackle the topic of violence against disabled women and girls, to be held in Italy. A booklet on this subject is also being prepared for publication. For its part, the Pan-African Women's Committee is organising a big conference of women with disabilities in early 2002 in Mauritius.

We need good programmes to train and empower women with disabilities all over the world. We need good legal instruments in all countries to protect the human rights of people with disabilities with special mention of the issues concerning women with disabilities. Let us work and fight together to make this world a better place for all. ♪

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