

Women with Disabilities are Empowering Themselves

By Anneli Joneken

Iwould like to speak about EMPOWERMENT. I like to use this word because it helps to understand the release of the power inside all people. It describes how the power and capabilities within a person start to be used. It relates to a learning process and to the understanding of one's own worth and human rights. I want to relate empowerment to the growth of women and girls with disabilities.

The United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities are a very important human-rights tool for all persons with disabilities. Specific important human rights tools for women and girls are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In my view, in order to be able to use these tools effectively it is better to work together with other people with the same interests—in disability rights organisations, in women's organisations, in groups and committees at local, national and international levels.

But to be able to work together with others you need to have started your own individual empowerment process. You need to dare do things. Not be too afraid.

It is wise to build groups and loose networks as well as specific



www.arttoday.com

independent organisations of women with disabilities. By discussing and acting together within these structures, the issues at stake can be formulated better, and then presented to other disability or mainstream fora for further discussion. These discussions may then change some policies and rules that negatively affect us. There might be problems that we want to get solved, and together we can formulate the issues and lobby for them. Also, in these various groups and committees, the individual participants can grow in self-confidence and help develop each other's capabilities.

Within the disability rights movement, there is a big need to raise awareness of gender thinking and to identify the areas where the concerns of women and girls are central. In order to develop this awareness raising, it is vital that women and girls with disabilities raise their voices and place their priority issues on the agenda.

There is also a big need for more research to dig up the hard facts and figures that will describe the situation of women and girls with disabilities. All researchers who are reading this article, please help in assembling knowledge of the lives and living conditions of these women and girls. You can study the issue of education or employment and compare their situation with that of other women and with men. You can study the issue of violence against women and find out how women with disabilities, especially those who are very dependent on assistance from others, can get (or cannot get) help if they have been victims of violence. And you can study many other issues.

Women with disabilities took part in the process towards the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and are taking part in the follow-up. This process of empowerment gave new awareness to

many people. To my mind it is very important for women with disabilities to join a mainstream women's initiative such as the Beijing Platform of Action follow-up. Through such integration, many people can learn that women with disabilities are part of society and have the same human rights as others.

I would like to mention the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or Women's Convention again. Every four years, the countries that are signatory to this are required to report to the CEDAW committee on their own situation. Also, the committee recommended in 1991 that the situation of women and girls with disabilities should be included in all country reports. It is up to our organisations to assist our governments in this reporting. The CEDAW committee is grateful for alternative reports from NGOs as well. The UN Website is an important source of information: <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch>>.

Our priority concern, however, is the improvement of our everyday lives. (When you think about this, then the United Nations documents and meetings seem so far away!) We need concrete tools to be used in the various organisations and groups of women with disabilities. I think we should develop further how best we can exchange ideas, learn from good examples and practices. In Europe we are trying to use our organisations to channel exchanges and learning processes. In Asia, maybe women's groups in neighbouring countries can network more closely. We can also establish discussion groups on the Internet in various subject fields for those who have access to the Web and are interested.

In Europe we have an important NGO called European Disability Forum (EDF), with mem-

The crucial part of empowerment is to *dare* to empower ourselves, and to take steps to become integrated in new contexts within the society. It is important that many of us women with disabilities take active part in other organisations and movements.

bers from 17 countries. It has a committee that concerns itself with the issues of women and girls with disabilities, which in 1996 drafted an important piece of work, the Manifesto of Disabled Women. This was adopted in 1998 by the EDF. It has been translated into all European Union languages as well as into Russian and Estonian. You can get the text from the EDF Website: <<http://www.edf-feph.org>>. The Manifesto carries 20 pages of text covering most aspects of life, with specific comments on what is important for women with disabilities in each area. In Sweden, we are using the Manifesto in awareness-raising activities as well as in lobbying work.

Thinking back, I can identify the United Nations International Experts seminar in Vienna on Disabled Women, held in August 1990, as a very important meeting. The Vienna seminar, in a way, accelerated the empowerment process of women with disabilities. We started becoming more vocal. We stopped accepting that some issues are taboo. The issue of violence as well as the issues of sexuality and parenthood were raised. We encouraged each other to think and act and to raise awareness, both within our own groups, among women with disabilities, and in general fora.

The international development of these issues will not exist without the national movements of women with disabilities. And development at the national level is dependent on our actions and thinking as individuals and organisations. This is not simple at all, since we have various disabilities, and we need to solve many obstacles in our everyday life to be able to function—getting our education, earning our living, getting the assistance, rehabilitation and health care that we need. In solving these everyday problems we also need encouragement from our sisters and brothers, we need examples of how others have found their own solutions, and we need to give examples ourselves.

The crucial part of empowerment is to *dare* to empower ourselves, and to take steps to become integrated in new contexts within the society. It is important that many of us women with disabilities take active part in other organisations and movements. We all need to become good effective lobbyists, maybe using our various networks to make an even stronger impact in pushing for the issue. And we very much need partners and allies to support our work, to listen to us and to make our endeavours successful.

And all this work we can do at our local level in the community where we live, together with others, at national, sub-regional and regional and global levels. Let us all become empowerment activists for the concerns of women and girls with disabilities, with strong networks linking us to each other. And let us hope for partnerships with mainstream women's organisations in our own countries and internationally. ♪

Anneli Joneken is Pol.mag. chairperson of the Forum—Women and Disability in Sweden. She can be contacted at E-mail: <anneli@joneken.se>.