



*'Political Activism and Identity Making: The
Involvement of Women in the Disability Rights
Movement in Australia'*

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Political Activism and Identity Making: The Involvement of Women in the Disability Rights Movement in Australia.

NB: This paper was written in June 1999 and gives an analysis of the involvement of women in the disability rights movement in Australia up to early 1999.

This paper examines the rise in Australia of a feminist engagement with the disability rights movement. It starts from an overall assessment of the emergence of the movement, and then explores the political, cultural and social dimensions of the institutional and ideological struggles that have evolved. An examination will be made of the impact of feminism on the disability movement and the role of women within the movement. The emergence of Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA), a cross-disability national body, and the work of WWDA on crimes of violence against disabled women, raises questions about the ways women with disabilities come to identify with an autonomous women's group. It also examines the resistance of feminist theory and practice to the acknowledgment of specific issues of disabled women.

Preface - social movement theory, feminism and the absence of disability

For the disabled feminist, neither the disability movement nor the women's movement fully addresses her concerns we must educate both movements in the issues specifically affecting disabled women, especially since the women's movement has shown a willingness to learn about the issues affecting disabled women, especially since the women's movement has shown a previous willingness to learn about the issues affecting other women of dual identities...(Blackwell-Stratton et al 1988)

Even though social movements are well recognised as characteristic phenomena of the contemporary era, neither social movement analysts in general nor feminist accounts in particular have paid serious attention to the disability movement. Yet as Marian Blackwell-Stratton and her colleagues argued over a decade ago, drawing the two movements together remains a crucial issue. This paper examines the role of feminist activism in the disability movement in Australia, arguing that only a gendered account of this social movement can offer a meaningful analysis of social change.

The rise of the disability movement raises many questions for theorists of social movements and for feminists seeking to understand the practical application of feminism in social change and struggles for social justice. The new discourses of critical disability studies seek to deconstruct and transform oppressive ideological and professional practices experienced by

disabled people (Shakespeare 1998) (Davis 1997). The social model of disability argues that disability is created by political and economic structures, which contain self-serving assumptions of 'normality'. Disability cannot be explained by the physiological condition of the individual subject, though the reality of impairment is recognised. The social model directly confronts medical models of disability, which present problems experienced by people with disabilities as arising solely from bodily impairments.

The public face of disability politics is usually articulated by male scholars and activists (see for example (Shakespeare 1993), (Shapiro 1994), (Charlton 1998), (Morgan 1995), (Newell 1996), (Oliver 1997), who fail to include any sustained analysis of the gendered nature of the movement - and this is the case for the USA, the UK, Ireland and Australia. In contrast, women devote less attention to an analysis of the disability movement, preferring to look at the intersection between feminism and disability (Blackwell-Stratton et al 1988), (Meekosha 1990), (Morris 1996), (Cooper 1999), (Munford 1995).

The impact of feminism on the disability movement and the role of women within the movement both shed important light on the rise and current status of the disability movement in Australia. Disabled women continue to question the lack of attention given by 'mainstream' feminism and prominent feminists to issues of disability. For instance, Anne Summers, a leading Australian feminist, in her recent review of "urgent issues for the men and women of Australia", decried the attacks on the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, detailing the degradation of support for women's and race issues. She made no mention of the abolition of the position of Disability Discrimination Commissioner (Summers 1997). Disability is integral to any understanding of social movements, because it tests the limits of social constructionist interpretations of difference. Similarly, feminism has a long history of developing women's organisations to fight for social change, reflecting a gendered awareness of the structures of power within social movements and particular organisations.

1. Understanding social movements: contemporary movement theories

The central argument of cultural analysts of social movements (e.g. Melucci 1995a; Melucci 1995b) draws on a conceptualisation of social relations in a three-layered set of interests and interactions. In traditional conceptions of these movements, women and disabled people are often conceived of completely separately – feminism without disability, disability without gender. Using Melucci's model, we can portray feminist and disability movements in these sequential steps of development:

1. Cultural and social dislocation: Societal tensions in which the cultural priorities of the dominant social groups seek to suppress, or to marginalise, the experience, needs and demands of particular minority sectors. For women, their rising expectations were blunted

by repressive patriarchal structures, leading to critiques of patriarchy and the desire for liberation (reflecting the primacy of white, middle class, able-bodied women). For disabled people, their marginalisation at a time of wider societal demands for participation and equality, led them to press for disability rights (reflecting the primacy of more educated white men).

2. Cultural models: The minority groups begin to take substantial social and political form through a gathering together and the emergence of a shared sense of common history and then purpose. For women, this was expressed in the development of a feminist culture and politics, both in academic and popular discourse and practice. For disabled people, this meant a growing awareness of the commonality of disability experiences of discrimination, even where the disabilities were very different.
3. Symbolic challenges: The emerging movement begins to challenge the dominant social priorities, and in this process begins to engage with them and perhaps transform them in the direction of the interests of the minority. For women, struggles for affirmative action, reproductive rights, childcare, right to sexuality, and equal pay mark these challenges and negotiations. For disabled people, the demand for citizenship rights, the right to participate in social political and economic life, and the right to independent living mark this process.

In order to understand the emergence of particular social movements the specific organisational issues - resources, organisational capacities, mobilization strategies - also have to be included so that the movements can be analysed as "socially constructed collective realities" (Melucci 1995a). Thus social movements are always in the process of becoming, and their form and coherence is a contingent phenomenon, the momentary outcome of many individual decisions, as well as actual collective action. They are also dependent on the existence of and their entry into public spaces, through which they can make their key questions visible and collective - particularly important for disabled people.

2. Forging collective identities: becoming a movement

The disability movement has its initiating 'societal dislocation' embedded in the ideologies of normalcy, work, and aesthetics which interpret those who are abnormal (deviant, bizarre, transgressive, challenging, physically marked, socially maladroit) as unmanageable and therefore 'outside' the norm. These ideologies have their generating conditions within the worlds of production and reproduction. Within the economic processes of the regulation and exploitation of labour the individual is assessed in terms of his/her potential productivity and capacity to generate value. In the 'domestic' sphere, the individual (usually here a woman) is assessed in terms of her capacity to give birth, nurture and support future generations on behalf of society.

As labour becomes increasingly regulated, categorised, and subject to surveillance, those who are unable fully to labour in a conventional sense (a condition that does not define all people with disabilities by any means) discover the constraining energies, which marginalise them. This process of marginalisation has appeared in different forms in historical societies; disability as touched by Heaven, as touched by the Devil, as a matter of shame, as a sign of uselessness, as an indication of special insight or skill - and so on. In contemporary societies such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA, this process of marginalisation occurs within a wider societal situation of resistance, challenge and cultural struggles by many minority groups. Disabled people find their encapsulation and presentation as 'the Other', as demeaning and disempowering.

The sphere of reproduction has been even more tightly regulated by society, where women have been controlled in relation to their sexual desire, their sexuality, their right to motherhood, and their right to care for their children. The primary vehicle for this control has been the medicalisation of the disabled woman, and the construction of an apparatus of surveillance and management under the control of the medical and caring professions, and the state. For instance, the mass sterilisation of disabled women without their knowledge or consent has been a regular feature of Australian and US medical services (see for example Brady and Grover 1997). While women experienced the same sort of feelings of disempowerment as men, they also experienced the specific oppressive moments of gender power- especially around sexual harassment and violence in institutions.

some of the disability groups were disinclined to take on issues around violence because it raised complexities within their own organisations, especially if the violence was perpetrated by a disabled person (Sue, Disability Activist, April 1999).

By the 1980s a list of specific issues for women was emerging, demonstrating the ways in which the disempowerment of gender relations interacted with and intensified the disempowerment of disability relations. In 1986 an Australian government report in rehabilitation services for women (never released, despite demands from the disability movement) identified some of the most outstanding priorities for women with disabilities as being: access to rehabilitation and employment services, lack of employment and education opportunities, experiencing crude and demeaning stereotypes, being channelled into voluntary or housework as 'appropriate' occupations and sexual harassment in institutions (Meekosha 1986). Writing at a similar time Blackwell-Stratton et al. (Blackwell-Stratton et al 1988) identified issues of reproductive rights, employment, accommodation, physical access, affirming social roles, and social participation. By the late 1990s these issues have been extended by changes in genetic engineering technologies and the threats these pose to women with disabilities, liberating communication technologies, the growing public awareness of

institutional, public and familial violence issues, and the post-modern concerns with style, queer sexualities, bodies and fashion.

The Australian movement began to take on its current form through the governmentality of the UN Year of the Disabled Person in 1981. The movement had yet to have much coherence, though its critiques of the modes of control and exclusion began to resonate with the wider society, as well as with the growing community of people with disabilities. In some important areas disability activists began to gain purchase on the political system, through in part drawing on the extensive work around the possibilities for 'independent living' in the USA and elsewhere. The independent living movement placed autonomy and control as core goals of their struggle, arguing that individual responsibility, personal freedom and self-reliance should mark the program for the disability movement (Batavia 1997). The independent living movement was one component of the emerging wider movement which sought to create that alternative 'imagined' community that Melucci (Melucci 1995a: 113) identifies as a crucial component of the mobilising strategy of a social movement.

Yet this was not necessarily the type of new community disabled women imagined. It reflected many of the traditional values of a patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian set of social relations that men with disabilities had themselves been subject to, and with which they sometimes identified. Women with disabilities often expressed their subordination through compliance, feelings of rolelessness, and a desire for the most archetypal traditional female roles. The women who had been institutionalised saw their liberation at times as lying in the performance of 'femininity' and other 'normal' roles.

The rise of the movement, and the process of turning personal troubles into public issues (Shakespeare 1993) represents an affirmation of one's own identity in the face of massive delegitimising processes in the wider society (Meekosha and Jakubowicz 1996). This process of activism was directed against state institutions, and social institutions that used the state to legitimise their power and defend their interests (e.g. organisations of medical professionals). In the process of confronting apparently well-established fields of power, the movement provided/ developed structures of meaning with which activists can identify, and processes of organisation with which they became involved. Though here too, women would find those masculinist assumptions and practices permeated the organisations, particularly around issues of power and control, and in response to this, began to develop their own networks. These included the women's network of DPI (Australia), SAD¹ and WinVisible in the UK, and DAWN² in Canada.

¹ Sisters Against Disablement

² Disabled Women's Network 1985. For an account of the early years of DAWN see Stone, 1989.

3. Disability movements and the state

Disability movements seek to provoke action by governments - and a great deal of the visible community activism within the movement internationally is directed at raising public awareness so as to increase pressure on governments. In her discussion of the British and US experience of legislative change, Caroline Gooding (Gooding 1994) makes two arguments - firstly, that the state only acted under sustained pressure from organisations of people with disabilities, and secondly, that once legislation was enacted, additional pressure was necessary to have it implemented, as it stayed a low priority with government agencies.

The following table provides an outline of the developments over the past 25 years in Australia. There are clear signs of the state response to the movement, but in each case the specific outcomes have to be interpreted in terms of the "balancing act" between disabled people and lobbyists from other interests.

Australia	Party in Power	Govt Action	Other Activities
1974	ALP	Handicapped Persons Assistance Act	
1977	Conservative coalition, but established by ALP	Commission of Inquiry into Poverty	'Poverty and Disability in Australia' Report
1978	Conservative coalition, but established by ALP	Commission into Human Relationships	
1981	Conservative coalition	International Year of the Disabled Person	
1984	ALP	Disability Advisory Council of Australia (DACA) established to provide advice to Govt.	Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) funded by govt.
1985	ALP	'New Directions' Handicapped Persons Review reports	Identifies Independent Living options, training and employment opportunities, access to mainstream services- the beginning of 'normalisation'.
1985	ALP		Women Disability and Health Network South Aust established. Women's Network of DPI established
1985	ALP	Home and Community Care Programme	Focuses on deinstitutionalisation/ Social Role Valorisation
1985	ALP	Establishes Office of Disability in Department of Community Services and Health	Policy area of disability services identified. Attendant care protest rallies.
1986	ALP	Disability Services Act; Statement of principles and objectives	Review of Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service undertaken; includes Meekosha's ' <i>Breaking In and Breaking Out on Women Disability and Rehabilitation Services</i> '. Report suppressed by Govt.
1987	ALP		First application for funding to Office of Status of Women by DPI Women's Network – not successful
1988	ALP	Social Security Review	Aims to shift people with disabilities into labour market/programs
1991	ALP	Social Security Review produces Disability Reform Package	Commonwealth/State Disability agreement to implement strategy - focuses on employment as key issue.
1992	ALP	Disability Standards Working Party established	Creates standards for services, using social role valorisation and related criteria.

1993	ALP	Disability Discrimination Act passed	Makes discrimination against disabled people in provision of services illegal, unless unreasonable. Requires Commonwealth departments and agencies to make disability action plans. Sets up Disability Commissioner at Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
1994	ALP		Office of Disability seeding grant to DPI Women's Network.
1995	ALP		Office of Status of Women grant for part time worker to Women With Disabilities Australia. WWDA incorporates and moves into own premises.
1995	ALP	Disability Standards set	Action plans for transport, employment. Resistance begins to grow in private sector e.g. Bus and Coach Owners.
1996	Conservative Coalition	Department of Human Services Health	WWDA funding provided by Office of Disability on 6 monthly basis. Significant cuts to programs in August budget; Yeatman report criticises lack of effective outcomes in relation to the DSA agreements. State/Commonwealth agreement in crisis as states and Commonwealth fail to reach consensus while 1991 agreement finishes.
1997	Conservative Coalition	Attack on Political Correctness	Disability Commissioner (Elizabeth Hastings) retires and is not replaced; DDA amended to limit rights of people with disabilities to take action; funding to Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) cut by over 40%. No disabled person remains in the disability unit of HREOC.
1998	Conservative Coalition	Attorney General's NGO Forum on Human Rights	WWDA nominee represents National Caucus of Disability Organisations

In Australia as in the USA and the UK, consciousness of disability discrimination came about partly as a result of forced segregation. The sense of unity that emerged out of the experiences of institutional oppression had implications for the development of the movement, where the initial push was for the recognition of basic human rights.

An ungendered analysis that focuses solely on legislative and policy responses in the public sphere in areas such as housing, services, education, employment and anti discrimination can avoid an examination of the role of the movement in the private sphere. This is the social space where disabled women experience marginalisation, poverty, degendering, in the form of sterilisation and other reproductive technologies, and male violence.

The question still remains as to what effect the disability movement has had on wider social views and attitudes and what improvements have been made for people with disabilities, in particular for women. Will change only occur if women with disabilities organise as disabled women through autonomous organisations? We can see in WWDA a partial answer to this latter question.

4. Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA)

...we've changed from being the secretaries, the organisers, the tea makers and all those very useful, but non-recognised, non-status bearing tasks. I think we've become very creative. We're setting the agenda rather than following the agenda. (Jo, Activist, April 1999)

The influence of feminist strategies of social change is seen within the women's networks of the disability movement in Australia. The relatively recent process of identification by groups of disabled women marks a strategic positioning at the local, state and national level. Women are actively represented at all levels on forums and government advisory bodies.

Disabled women were active participants in the Australian delegation to the UN Decade of Women conference in Beijing in 1996 (Strahan 1996)

I think that WWDA's work pre and post Beijing was essential...

I think that Women's Disabilities were there from all countries was important and I think the fact that they involved other women in saying how are we going to actually exist in this muddy, slushy, accessibly-hopeless thing? And so you've got other women saying, oh no this is terrible, terrible...

Some women got dragged in 'cause they could see that the other women couldn't get up the ramp or can't get up a step and ... women coming back to Australia, and I'm very much on the fringe, said to me 'Oh it was dreadful in Beijing. Your people couldn't get to the meetings'. (Jo, Activist, April 1999)

In 1985, a group of feminists within Disabled People's International (Australia) formed a women's network. However it was not until 1994 that Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA), an independent organisation of women, received funding from the Federal Office of Status of Women, following initial seeding support from the Federal Office of Disability.

The **aim** of WWDA is to give women with a disability a unified voice within the disability movement, the women's movement and society in general.

The **objectives** of WWDA are:

- To prompt the feminist goals of achieving social, economic, educational and sexual equality for women.
- To change social attitudes, practices, and power relationships which discriminate against women with disabilities.
- To lobby for the implementation of procedures and enactment legislation which will advance and benefit women and combat sexism.
- To inform and educate the public with a view to advancing the opportunities for conditions of women in the political, creative, civil and social fields as well as in industry, commerce, the professions and in the community generally.
- To develop a network of women with disabilities throughout Australia to work together for the mutual benefits of all women with disabilities.
- To be a human resource development vehicle working with gender issues from the perspective of women with disabilities.
- To develop an information sharing and communication vehicle.
- To continue advocacy work in the government system for the interests of women with disabilities.
- To advocate for women with disabilities true involvement in all levels of society.
- To ensure women with disabilities have sufficient information to enable them to make an informed choice about matters which concern their lives.
- To support national and local work of members.
- To develop leadership and sharing of responsibilities to enable women with disabilities to take their place in what ever section of society they choose.
- To establish a solid financial base and to identify project funders for national, state and local projects.
- To ensure that disability organisations do not overlook the issue of gender in their responses to enquiries to discussion papers.

The language and philosophy of WWDA distinguishes it from other disability groups – it sees other women in the feminist movement as a crucial 'target' for action, for WWDA believes that the advancement of disabled women will in part depend on the priority accorded to disability by the women's movement. The other key target is the broader disability movement. As one WWDA activist noted,

That enabled them to not just concentrate on petty issues in the disability movement... but look at broader human rights issues...women with disabilities set themselves up as a non-medical model group, and now it is the only group around that does this...the disability movement has not really taken on an analysis from a gender perspective...Women have not felt they've had a voice...It's also that they felt locked out of the women's movement. (Patricia, Activist, April 1999).

In recent years, under the impact of an economically rationalist conservative national government, WWDA's experience of governmentality has also changed. Originally it was supported by the Prime Minister's Department through the Office for the Status of Women - as an organisation of women. In 1996 the government reclassified it as a disability organisation and it lost access to National Non Government Organisations Women's funding program - it would now have to depend on the disability development and research funding of the Department of Family and Community Services. No rationale was ever offered for this change - even though WWDA saw itself as an organisation of women fitting the goal, to "advance equality for women, improving their economic, social, political and legal status", (OSW, Australia 1999).

Moreover, a key concern is to represent disabled women on key government advisory committees such as the National Women's Round Table, the Federal Attorney General's Human Rights Forum, the Ministerial Committee on Employment, Education Training and Youth Affairs, AUSTEL Consumer Consultative Forum, Telstra Regional Consumer Councils and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare Data Reference Group (WWDA Strategic and Business Plan 1999-2000). Despite lack of funding to even organise an annual general meeting of state representatives, the organisation has over 1800 members of which 264 organisations are associate members.

We've got women writing policy papers and representing WWDA in various areas who aren't members of the National Executive Committee. I think that's hugely important. Whereas in the traditional organisations I've experienced, the representatives have been on the Executive or the Council's Management. (Jo, Activist April 1999)

Although WWDA is clearly women-centred, given the level of hostility and ambivalence by many disabled women to what they perceive as the lack of support to disability issues by able bodied feminists, can it be seen as a feminist?

It's a mark of the marginalisation of many women with disabilities about not feeling comfortable with feminism because they obviously see it as an area that they've been excluded from (Patricia, Activist April 1999).

Clearly some members have a limited understanding of what might constitute a feminist program, others are fearful of what is seen to be support from feminists for pre-natal and pre-implant testing designed to eliminate particular impairments - the implications being that particular impairments would be 'bred out', and therefore, women with those impairments had no social value. Nevertheless many members of WWDA identify with the organisation that it is

quite clearly feminist in orientation and style, and provides an avenue for finding meaning and advancing issues that no one else will support. It also extends feminist ways of working into the arena of disability. A young woman activist noted in reflecting on WWDA's political style, that:

It is a feminist organisation in the sense that it's about respecting and valuing women's ways, knowing women's ways of gaining knowledge. And it's very much about sharing. There's a lot of mentoring that happens, leadership and mentoring work. And a lot of it's not necessarily even recognised as that....it just happens. It's very much about empowerment as well. It's about bringing women in and giving them opportunities, giving them skills and resources and knowledge and (opportunities) for them to actually become more active in the organisation ... (Mira, Activist, April 1999).

5. Disability movements, women's movements and identity movements

The disability movement in Australia, with its history of fragmentation, geographical dispersal, and organisational and strategic problems, has recently, if reluctantly, acknowledged the experience of women. Feminists with disabilities constitute a small, but increasingly assertive political force in Australia. While individual women with disabilities have been active around gender issues since the beginnings of the disability rights movement in Australia³, collectively, they remained on the margins of debate and political action until the mid 1990s.

The discourses of disability are being affected by small groups of disabled feminists and their colleagues coming together to research and document issues. This includes work on employment (Davis 1993), education (Davis 1991), violence and abuse, (Chenoweth 1993) (Strahan 1997b; Strahan 1997c), homelessness (Currie 1996; Currie et al 1996), health issues, (Temby and Cooper 1996) (Temby 1996), communication technology (Masden 1996), sterilisation and reproductive rights (Petersen 1991) (Handsley 1994), sexuality (Marks 1996), eugenics and euthanasia (Hume 1996), and media representation and stereotyping (Meekosha and Jakubowicz 1996) (Meekosha and Dowse 1997).

Women with disabilities are not adopting fixed and essentialist identities. The situation is more contingent - responding to changes in Australian society that witness, for example, moves towards care within the family away from care in the community, and moves against equal opportunity programs and anti-discrimination legislation. Women with disabilities are not only constructing identities/subjectivities that challenge these practices, but also claiming spaces from which to speak or perform.

³ In common usage of the disability rights movement is seen as paralleling the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, this does not deny the many struggles by people with disabilities in Australia for citizen rights that predate the International Year

Many women with disabilities experience in their lives an enormous degree of lack of agency, lack of autonomy, lack of faith of other people and themselves in their own decision-making capacity, lack of resources to make decisions so having an organisation which is run by women with disabilities focusing specifically on the issues is enormous...an enormously empowering thing in itself. the issues that women with disabilities face are often trivialised, as are the issues of people with disabilities in general, but the issues for women with disabilities in particular are trivialised and women with disabilities themselves are trivialised and so to be taken seriously in a national organisation to make your own analysis of what's happening and to have a vehicle to take that forward is a very empowering thing (Sue, Activist, April 1999).

From within these new collectivities, issues of language, culture and representation are under scrutiny. While attempting to include a diversity of disabilities and identities, women with disabilities in Australia are attempting to adopt different ways of working, shifting the terrain about what constitutes priority issues, while seriously addressing questions of leadership and mentoring.

Inside the disability movement there is a growing concern that the nature of its representation in the policy and consultation processes is being appropriated by service delivery, carer and parent groups. Since the change in government in 1996, two trends have become apparent. Support for organisations of people with disabilities has declined compared to that provided to service delivery organisations, while where it continues in areas such as advocacy, it has been reinterpreted to focus on information giving rather than communal organising (Cooper 1997). WWDA stands alone as the only women's organisation and the only cross-impairment organisation controlled by disabled people in the National Caucus of Disability Organisations (the others being: National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS; Head Injury Council of Australia; Blind Citizens Australia; National Ethnic Disability Alliance; Carers Association of Australia; Australian Psychiatric Disability Coalition; Deafness Forum Limited; Women With Disabilities Australia; Physical Disability Council of Australia; National Council on Intellectual Disability).

The tensions for organisations such as WWDA sit at the point between playing an advocacy role on behalf of disabled women, and doing community development with disabled women. The tasks identified in the 1980s of educating both the disability movement and the women's movement remain as challenging today as two decades ago. These are compounded by issues of logistics, travel, funding, finding articulate advocates and remaining accountable to the broader membership. The pressure on key activists takes its toll, as they try to run organisations with limited funding and very little support, from the wider feminist community.

There's a major tension... what are women getting out of this organisation? And really I don't want us to become an organisation that really is seen to be just doing that national work with no links back to the membership. I think that's a huge tension for a national organisation and always will be because of the size of Australia and the fact that we are then dependent on state groups to be viable and vibrant. And they're not always. They're only that in pockets .. And, again, dependent on who has the energy, personality and resources. We're not funded to support those state groups (Patricia, Activist, April 1999).

5. Conclusion

The rise of disability movements - especially those focusing their efforts around discrimination - reflects the fracturing of societies around discourses of rights within a world of increasing economic rationalism. The distance between the ideology of equality and the experience of discrimination has provided the trigger for many activist initiatives, in the process building a sense of some shared experience, and through this the possibility of an identity politics which challenges the negative stereotypes of disability. The crucial challenge to this analysis lies in an assessment of how much the movement has actually achieved in the lives of people with disabilities - in addition to any of the legislative and symbolic advances, however important these are.

The test of the success of a movement lies in part in the degree to which social transformations have occurred which reflect movement goals and priorities. One dimension to the social transformation can be found in the degree to which people with disabilities feel more empowered to participate in society, and are able to use the social institutions to meet their economic, social and cultural needs. Most people with disabilities are still trapped in poverty, isolation, and marginalisation. Even so, disabled women have developed the major national organisation of disabled people committed to a social analysis of disability in Australia. It is a bizarre twist of fate that the Commonwealth, in its campaign against political correctness, is now pressuring WWDA to open its full membership to men and to carers - thus weakening the capacity of the group to realise its goals as a feminist organisation of disabled women.

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