

The experiences of disabled women

Disabled women feel they suffer from a broad range of discrimination according to the Disabled Women's Project. The project was designed to reach disabled women who had not had any previous contact with the disability movement and groups of women who were likely to be particularly discriminated against, such as black disabled women, disabled lesbians and disabled older women. Brenda Ellis was the Women's Officer. The disabled women she came in contact with raised the following issues:

- Issues which may also be problems for non-disabled women and disabled men, such as low incomes or accessible transport, are exacerbated for disabled women.
- As well as feeling marginalised within society as a whole, disabled women also felt marginalised within the disability movement and the women's movement.
- Disabled women felt their needs were not being taken into account by service providers; they reported difficulties getting access to information, housing, safety, transport, employment and education. They also reported facing patronising attitudes and being offered little choice of the form of services they might receive.
- Transport was a major issue for disabled women. Lack of reliable, accessible transport meant they were isolated in their homes, unable to pursue employment, education or leisure activities.
- Disabled lesbians felt discriminated against within the disability movement, within the lesbian and gay community and by service providers.
- Disabled black women also felt they suffered multiple discrimination, from within the disability movement, their own communities and by society.
- Services for women suffering sexual abuse, such as women's refuges and rape counselling services, were rarely able to accommodate the needs of disabled women.
- Of those interviewed, disabled women in residential care and in long-term units in hospital seemed to be the most isolated and to experience an extremely low quality of life.
- Women participating in the project greatly valued the opportunity of getting together in mutual support and developing the skills of self-advocacy which it offered.

Background

The Disabled Women's Project sprang from a conference of disabled women held in London in June 1992 by GLAD (Greater London Association of Disabled People) which concluded that a network of disabled women should be set up and supported.

The resulting project aimed to:

- tackle the isolation of disabled women

- put disabled women's concerns on the agenda of organisations of disabled people
- enable disabled women to influence the debate on the 'social model' of disability (which predicates that people are 'disabled' by their social environment not by their particular physical condition)
- ensure that disabled women's concerns are heeded by service planners.

A Women's Officer was appointed to develop and support a network of disabled women in London and to promote women's issues within the disability movement.

The findings summarised here come from information given by disabled women participating in the project in two ways: through four conferences for women and meetings organised by GLAD, and through the direct contact between the Women's Officer and individual disabled women who sought her advice. The theme of self-advocacy ran throughout the conferences. Gaining the confidence to speak out and make choices can be difficult for isolated individuals; the women participating stressed the value of getting together in mutual support, to develop these skills.

Marginalisation of disabled women

Many of the difficulties experienced by women, disabled men and people from minority ethnic communities may be exacerbated for disabled women who find themselves suffering from multiple discrimination.

The women's movement

Disabled women have found it extremely difficult to be included by movements such as the women's movement. There has been little attempt to involve them. Women's groups seem unaware of the disability movement and ignorant about how to contact disabled women. Events are held at inaccessible venues, publicity is not aimed towards disabled women, for example, by targeting organisations where they are likely to be found or by producing information in accessible formats, such as large print, Braille and on tape.

The disability movement

Within the disability movement, women's issues have rarely been put on the agenda. There has been little recognition within disability organisations that many issues which affect disabled people may have a particular impact on women, such as low incomes and inaccessible transport; there has been little debate within the movement about issues such as sexual abuse and domestic violence.

There has also been little attention paid to the particular needs of disabled black and ethnic minority women, such as access to information in different languages, access to black and ethnic minority disability groups, or to the particular needs of disabled women refugees.

Service provision

Participants in the project felt that service providers did not consult disabled women about the kind of services they themselves wanted. Disabled older women, in particular, found filling in long forms applying for services difficult.

Disabled women had encountered attitudes towards them which they found very patronising, implying that disabled women are passive and need looking after instead of encouraging disabled women to speak up, voice their own concerns and have a choice about what is available.

One young disabled woman was receiving training in 'life skills' to enable her to live independently. The Social Services Department insisted she hang out her own washing; however, this took a very long time and proved very laborious. The young woman felt that it wasted time she could be using to participate in a more worthwhile activity. However, she was denied any choice about this and felt she would have 'failed' in her training if she argued about this task.

The care services offered to women varied enormously from one borough to the next. Home cleaning, shopping and bathing services were particularly difficult to obtain: some women interviewed were only receiving one bath per month. Other services were seen as only partly meeting women's needs, for example, it was felt that a meals-on-wheels service providing food was not as satisfactory as a lunch club where disabled women would also be able to socialise.

Disabled women were also concerned about being expected to pay for some services which they regarded as essential, for example, Lifeline pendants used to summon help in an emergency; many disabled women felt unsafe in their homes without one and felt they should not be expected to pay for this out of often limited incomes.

Transport

Transport is a major issue for disabled women; in addition to the general problems of getting around faced by disabled people, they have a particular concern with personal safety.

Specialist transport has serious drawbacks. Dial-A-Ride and Taxicard which provide transport for disabled people in most parts of London are not co-ordinated or integrated; for example, you may be able to travel within your borough on Dial-A-Ride but it is almost impossible to travel between boroughs. They are also extremely difficult to contact. Many women reported finding Taxicard costly and unreliable. It also has serious limitations if you want to travel after 10pm or when it's raining (when the general demand for taxis goes up). Some women do not find the black cabs used by Taxicard easy to get into.

With some exceptions, mainstream public transport is very difficult to use and remains largely inaccessible. The regional rail networks usually require wheelchair users to give 48 hours notice of their intention to travel. Outdoor scooters are not permitted on InterCity trains, with the exception of a few routes in London and the South East.

Disabled lesbians

When organising events for disabled lesbians, the project found that they needed to be assured of confidentiality. Disabled lesbians felt they were 'invisible' both to disability organisations and to many service providers. As well as suffering discrimination from homophobic attitudes in society and within the disability movement because of their sexuality, they also felt discriminated against within the lesbian and gay

movement as disabled people: most venues where lesbians meet are inaccessible and there is a 'body beautiful/youth' culture which can exclude disabled lesbians.

Black and ethnic minority disabled lesbians felt they suffered multiple discrimination. Most of those participating in the project were not 'out' in their own communities and were reluctant to be out within the lesbian and gay movement or disability movement.

One lesbian reported that when her home carer arrived and found her in bed with her partner she refused to work and left. This had happened to her on more than one occasion. Disabled lesbians taking part in the project wanted to be able to choose their own home carers.

Older lesbians experienced discrimination when using day centres or when living in residential homes where they may not be 'out' and are denied a sexual identity. There are no residential homes that are exclusively lesbian and few, if any, housing associations taking on board the needs of older disabled lesbians.

One older lesbian was moved to another residential home because she was involved with another lesbian living at the home.

Another lesbian with learning difficulties had lived in a residential home and had a relationship with another woman there for several years. When she was moved out to live independently and her partner wished to join her, the Social Services Department decided that her partner should not be allowed to share the home.

Sexual abuse and domestic violence

There is little research or statistics about the effects of abuse on disabled women. However, during the course of the project, many women reported suffering from sexual abuse and domestic violence. In addition, calls relating to abuse and domestic violence were received from Women's Aid and Social Services Departments.

One woman was suffering domestic violence from her husband, who was her main carer. She had two children. She was turned away from refuges as there were no provisions for disabled women using carers. Finally, the woman was taken into a residential home, having to leave her two sons with her abusive husband.

A blind woman escaping from domestic violence was put into ordinary bed-and-breakfast accommodation by her local council, leaving her isolated and depending on the goodwill of other residents in the hotel.

Refuges are not geared up to support disabled women who may need daily support. Women escaping from domestic violence are usually placed in refuges that are out of the borough where they previously lived. However, disabled women in this situation found that the Social Services Department in the borough where their permanent home had been might then refuse to provide them with services, stating that they are out of their borough and not their concern.

Disabled women also reported being abused by their carers but feeling there was no way to escape from them. Women also reported sexual assault when using the Taxicard service.

One deaf woman had been raped and wanted counselling. Rape Crisis could not help her; they do not have a minicom and have no counsellors who can use sign languages. There were no other organisations known to the project who could offer emergency counselling to a deaf woman. One organisation needed a doctor's referral, something that some women may not agree to.

Disabled women and residential care

A number of women who came to each event were from residential care homes. The Women's Officer experienced difficulty in reaching women in residential care. These women also had the most problems in attending; for example, at the last minute they would ring up to say that transport or staff were unavailable to help. Staff rarely, if ever, saw it as their responsibility to help women out in these cases.

Women interviewed who lived in residential care reported that they were being denied such basic rights as choosing when they can go to the lavatory, when they might be assisted to bathe or when they might go to bed.

About the study

The project was the first ever project for disabled women. The project's officer was a disabled woman and was supported and advised by an advisory group of disabled women who all work professionally in the disability movement in London.

Further information

For further information please contact Brenda Ellis at GLAD, 336 Brixton Road, London SW9 7AA. Tel. 0171 274 0107 voice/minicom.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/sp81.asp>