



Tamara Thiebaux, *One-Legged Woman*, 1993. Watercolour, 13"x 10".
The full title is: *I Knew of a Woman With One Leg Who Didn't Use a Prosthesis and
She Let Her One Empty Pant-Leg Flap Around in the Wind Like a Flag*

Tamara Thiebaux lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She exhibits her work in group and solo shows throughout the Maritimes. She has illustrated three published books for children, and her work has appeared in a number of feminist journals.

The Disabled Women's Movement 1983 to 1993

by Pat Israel and Fran Odette

Quoique le Mouvement des droits pour personnes qui présentent des handicaps soit relativement jeune, depuis les dix dernières années, il est devenu un porte-parole par excellence pour aborder des questions telles la violence faite aux femmes handicapées, l'estime de soi, la maternité, l'emploi, la santé et la sécurité. Des groupes tels le Réseau des femmes handicapées (DAWN) ont joué un rôle clé pour assurer que la voix des femmes handicapées soit entendue à tous les niveaux sociaux et pour que les inquiétudes et les problèmes qui leurs sont particuliers soient adéquatement considérés.

Over the past ten years, women with disabilities have organized and strategized to ensure that our "equality" rights were highlighted and addressed within the realm of both the women's movement and the disability rights movement. Since that time, the organizing that took place resembled a small social movement, in which strength was in numbers and new ideas. This movement grew and flourished, demonstrating the creativity and initiative needed to have our voices heard. The movement got its early beginnings in 1983, when we began to write about our own lives, in our own words. From this came one of the first Canadian publications on disabled women's issues entitled *Voices From the Shadows: Women with Disabilities Speak Out* by Gwyneth Matthews. In 1985, two major events took place. An issue on "Women and Disability" was published by *Resources for Feminist Research*. For the first time a mainstream women's journal acknowledged

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and provided women with disabilities a forum in which to have their voices heard. This marked the beginning of an era in which women with disabilities demanded the right to take their place in the women's movement.

In June 1985, women with disabilities from across Canada gathered at a national meeting to form DisAbleD Women's Network Canada (DAWN Canada). This was an historic event since it was the first time that we had received funding to actually organize and come together to deal with our issues separately. Prior to this, disabled women's issues were ignored by both the disability rights movement and the women's rights movement. Many feminists did not seem to regard women with disabilities as women at all, while the disability rights movement failed to acknowledge that many of our issues were different from the issues affecting men with disabilities.

At our meeting it was amazing to listen to other women with disabilities talk about

their lives and know that we were not alone. It was great to finally meet other feminists with disabilities who were ready to work together to bring about change in the lives of women with disabilities. By the end of the meeting, decisions were made and priorities were set. We decided to tackle violence against women with disabilities, access to the women's movement and services, the provision of role-models for young girls with disabilities, as well as issues related to self-image and parenting. We resolved to conduct outreach to all women with disabilities, to provide information about our concerns, and finally, to be "a voice for disabled women in Canada." From that meeting, women went back to their communities and began to develop local and provincial DAWN groups. To date, there are 19 DAWN groups across Canada.

Violence against disabled women was the top priority. DAWN Canada was the first feminist, disability organization to tackle and bring forth the issues impacting women with disabilities who were victims/survivors of violence. From this, we began highlighting our additional concerns related to self-image, parenting, employment, and new reproductive technologies.

Reports were produced and widely distributed, marking the beginning of Canadian research conducted on the issues affecting women with disabilities. Our "expertise" on disabled women's issues became widely known. As a result, we were often consulted by government, women's groups, and disability-rights groups.

tration and isolation in their attempts to organize within these two movements. The notion that "difference is equated with inequality" captured many of the women's feelings of exclusion. Thus, one's "physical difference" can be and has been seen as a tool to be used against us in numerous ways. Although conferences are "accessible," access only goes so far. Often, we are obliged to use washrooms with little or no privacy or to travel miles to find the closest accessible one. Most workshops are held in locations that we can get to, but there may be one workshop that piques our interest which is on a split level, with no elevator access. Inclusion means more than making minimal provisions for those of us living on the "fringes."

Many feminist journals are inaccessible simply because of the academic jargon used to explain and describe our lives as women. While there continues to be a lack of feminist work done on disabled women's issues, many of us cannot access mainstream feminist literature as it is often not available in alternative formats such as braille, audio cassette, or large print.

It's time that the women's movement realizes that able-ism is practiced routinely by feminists who claim to be inclusive. This is seen in women's services that are not physically accessible or which assume that accessibility is a wheelchair ramp and nothing else. For example, for women who are deaf, deafened, or hard-of-hearing, accessibility may mean using a sign language or oral interpreter, a F.M. system, a TTY, or a phone with a volume control. For a woman who is non-verbal, she may use other forms of communication such as a blissymbolics board. Able-ism is also reflected in the kind of language that non-disabled feminists use when referring to feminists with disabilities. For example, "you are so courageous" or "it's so nice that you were able to get out and come to this conference."

Able-ism also rears its ugly head when we see that non-disabled women rarely attend the workshops held on disabled women's issues. Recently, at a conference of 300 women addressing the issue of violence, approximately seven women attended the workshop held on disabled women's issues; two in the morning and five in the afternoon. To the numerous women with disabilities who spend many hours preparing these semi-

nars, the low numbers of non-disabled women participating in our workshops may be seen as sending a message about the importance of this issue within the larger context of women's issues.

We still have a long way to go in getting many non-disabled feminists to recognize that we are women first and belong beside them in the struggle to fight all women's oppressions. This is not to deny our differences, as diversity is critical for this movement

to survive and be true to all women. The experiences that women with disabilities bring to the women's movement are invaluable. We welcome all non-disabled feminists to join with us to ensure "equality" for all women.

Pat Israel is a disabled feminist who lives in Toronto with her partner and four furry cats. She was a founding member of DAWN Canada and DAWN Toronto and is currently working on the Health and Disabled Women Project. Pat is also on the Transitional Council of Midwives.

Fran Odette is a disabled feminist activist who has been actively working in the area of equality rights for persons with disabilities

for a number of years. Fran works with the women's community around issues of access to services for women with disabilities, particularly with regards to services for survivors of violence.

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