

# Meeting Our Needs

## *Access for Women with Disabilities*

BY SHIRLEY MASUDA

**A**ccessible housing for women with disabilities must begin with affordability. Employment and Immigration Canada reported in 1988 that only 4% to 5.4% of persons with disabilities were working, and men outnumber women among the workers with disabilities. A study by DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada (Ridington, 1988) found that 58% of the women in that survey lived on incomes of less than \$10,000 a year. Half the mothers in our study were single parents and 36% lived on less than \$10,000 a year (a quarter of the women did not give any information about their incomes). Most of us live on welfare and disability pensions. We face the same problems as other poor women in finding housing that will fit our budgets. However, to find accessible housing that fits our limited resources is close to impossible.

Although accessibility must include every kind of disability, most people think of accessibility in terms of wheelchairs and that a wheelchair ramp up to the back door makes a place accessible. Even when there are wheelchair ramps there is often no thought given to the safety of the ramp or to the inside of the house. For a woman who uses a wheelchair to be independent and able to care for her children in her home, the entrance and every room and every appliance must be accessible to her and safe for her to use.

Making a house accessible to women who use wheelchair means that the house would also be accessible to all women who have mobility difficulties, to women of short stature, for mothers with strollers and for elderly women. Provincial building codes set out the guidelines for width, length, elevation and surface of ramps considered to be safe. Building codes also give exact measurements for accessible stoves, sinks and bathrooms. However, building codes are not easily interpreted and we have been asked to inspect newly renovated houses only to find that much time and money had been wasted in remodelling a house that remains inaccessible.

Some of the most alarming problems with seemingly accessible houses are ramps that have been built in the back of the house where the approach and the ramp are both unsafe. Ramps are too steep, too narrow and lack the proper safety rails. Door bells are too high, the doors are awkward or heavy and the locks and handles are difficult to manage. Thresholds also present barriers for women using wheelchairs. Inside the houses, doors and halls are too narrow and grab bars are often thought unnecessary in the bathrooms. Accessibility to the yard and the playground is often neglected.

DAWN Canada will not accept any definition of accessibility

that does not provide a safe and dignified access to all space in the house where day-to-day activities occur. Backyard ramps that require a woman to go through an alley or over dark and rough terrain is not an accessible entrance. Inaccessibility to the yard and the playground makes it impossible for a woman to supervise and to spend time outdoors with her children. An accessible kitchen has the cupboards lowered with pullout baskets and open spaces under the sink and the counter top stove. A laundry room that is not accessible makes it impossible for a mother to keep her active children in clean clothes. All rooms must have lots of open space for manoeuvring wheelchairs, fitting in crutches, canes and walkers as well as for women with visual disabilities who need space to feel their way around. Bathrooms must be properly equipped with lever door handles and water taps and with grab bars properly installed beside the toilet, the bath tub and/or the shower. Bathroom and bedrooms should also have emergency phones or call bells in the event that a woman falls and needs help.

Women who are deaf or hearing impaired require a different kind of accessibility — lights that flash when the door bell rings or when the fire alarm sounds must be installed in the bedrooms and the bathrooms as well as other areas so that they are visible from every part of the house or apartment. Ideally, the manager should have a Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD) so a woman who is deaf can contact her or him if the need arises.

Women who are blind learn very quickly to find their way around their new homes, but handrails and tactile strips on stairs and to mark changes in elevation are important guides and are a must for visitors who are blind. Reflective contrasting paint or stick-on strips will help visually impaired women find their way around. Routine regulations and other information must be made available to women who have visual disabilities on tape, verbally or in braille.

Women who have learning disabilities or women who have been labeled mentally handicapped will need routine instructions, such as fire regulations or washing machine instructions, in pictures or on tape. We may need to have things explained to us very carefully and slowly and we may need simple maps of the area to help us get around or to find our way home. Women who have learning disabilities process information differently from other people and the information must be presented to us in a form that we can comprehend. Women who have mental health disabilities above all else need acceptance in order to become part of the community.

The needs of women with disabilities vary greatly, even within

one kind of disability. Often accessibility is nothing more than acceptance of us as women with all of the thoughts and feelings of other women. Sometimes we need to be shown more patience and an effort must be made to understand our lives. We are strong women, we are people and we have the right to live our lives with as much dignity and independence as anyone else.

Accessibility is independence for women who have disabilities and accessibility must encompass every disability. Therefore it can become a very complicated issue. Before any changes are made to a dwelling the provincial building codes for accessibility must be checked for the minimum requirements for safety. However, most codes were written with the healthy young athlete in mind and need to be adjusted for the average woman with a

disability. We are also very aware that the authors of these codes have not thought of everything, especially the needs of mothers with disabilities.

Through the experience of coping with our disabilities we have learned many things that we share with each other. One of the most valuable things that we can share with anyone who is intending to make a living space accessible is to consult with a woman who has a disability and who knows what accessibility to women with all kinds of disabilities means. DAWN Canada has this expertise and we have DAWN women in every province who can provide you with this kind of help. We will be publishing a manual, *Meeting Our Needs*, in the next year, which is full of practical advice on becoming accessible to women with all kinds of disabilities. Again, this book is only a

guide and cannot replace the value of direct consultation with DAWN women.

For more information on accessibility for women who have disabilities you may contact DAWN Canada: DisAbled Women's Network Canada, 10401 Finlayson Drive, Richmond, BC V6X 1W8 or DAWN Canada: DisAbled Women's Network Canada, 4 Warner Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4A 1Z3.

Ridington, Jillian. *The Only Parent in the Neighbourhood: Mothering and Women with Disabilities*. DAWN Canada: DisAbled Women's Network Canada, 1988.

Shirley Masuda is the Project Coordinator for DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN), Canada. She lives in Richmond, British Columbia.

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**Women's Building  
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The Women's Building Forum of Sweden is a joint organization for women architects, interior architects, building engineers, journalists, sociologists, politicians, research workers and students. Its aim is to achieve equal working conditions for women in these categories and to take into consideration the needs of women in planning, building and rebuilding our communities.

WBF was established in 1979. It participated in the living environment exhibition "Boplat 80" (Living Place 80) in Stockholm and has presented the Building Department Minister with a demand for changes in the building laws of Sweden.

In conjunction with the planning of the new housing area Hansta near Stockholm, WBF presented a manifesto that shows how a conscious and careful planning effort can lead to

greater social interaction, less stress, better conditions for children and to greater equality between men and women.

Contact the Women's Building Forum of Sweden by writing:

**c/o Kvinnocentrum  
Birger Jarlsgatan 22  
114 34 Stockholm  
Sweden**