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By Megan Ryan

Thirty thousand women from all corners of the earth grabbed hands and swayed together, singing, “Gonna keep on moving forward, never turning back.” The Nigerian woman next to me grinned through her tears and squeezed my hand with the vibrant energy that was circulating and pulsing with the crowd. Hundreds of doves flew through the air, an all-women orchestra played, and dancers spun. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Conference), hosted in Beijing/Haui rou, China, had officially started. As a representative of American youth at the Conference, I joined women from every corner of the earth in the largest gathering of women in history.

My opportunity to participate in this historic Conference arose with the encouragement of Susan Groves, a women’s studies teacher promoting the attendance of youth at the Conference. Youth from around the Bay Area of Northern California excitedly formed the Bay Area Youth Delegation (BAYD) and began the preparations that would make the trip to the Conference possible. For a year prior to the Conference, BAYD fundraised to make the trip feasible. We also prepared by educating ourselves and our community about women’s and girls’ issues in this country and around the world. For the first time in the history of such UN Conferences, issues of the “girl-child” promised to have an important impact on the Conference’s Official Platform for Action as well as on both the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Conference we were to attend. We were thrilled to be taking part in this historic and necessary inclusion of world youth in planning for a global future.

Despite our attempts to familiarize ourselves with women and girl issues in the international context, such planning failed to prepare us for the vast spectrum of issues facing the girl-children of the world. We listened to thousands of women from very different social, economic, and political

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backgrounds share their experiences. We soon realized that the problems our group had explored as issues facing girls were, with the exception of sexual violence, very American concerns. Low self-esteem, unequal opportunities and encouragement in the sciences, athletics and politics, eating disorders, and the portrayal of women in the media are all very real problems faced by American girls. But the Conference broadened our perspective on the problems facing the girl-children of the world. We listened to an activist from Bangladesh discuss the plight of girls trapped in the child labor workforce which supports her country’s garment industry. We learned how families cope with poverty by selling their young girls, some as young as six-years old, to factories for a few American dollars. The girls work long hours in unsafe conditions. Here, neither unions nor any other mechanisms protect such children. When maimed by factory machines, these children have no safety net. Often girl-children are thrown into the streets, left with prostitution as their only option. Those “pretty” little girls who remain in the factory face a similar fate, often offered by factory owners to satisfy the sexual appetites of visiting European, American, and Japanese businessmen. For this Bangladesh activist, child labor and the growing sex-trafficking trade posed much different challenges than those faced by our delegation. Our group came to realize how diverse the priority issues were for the global community of women. Only then did we fully appreciate the Conference’s potential to replace our ignorance with a better understanding of the global women’s movement.

One of the most exciting aspects of the Conference, especially for the women who attended the Nairobi conference ten years ago, was to see the shift in leadership from American and European women to women from “developing” countries. While American women were scattered, women from other countries like India immediately developed strong networks among each other, discussing the day’s agenda and keeping each other abreast of the Conference’s developments. The benefits of such networks were obvious in workshops where women shared with us some of the great results coordinated efforts were achieving around the world. For example, one workshop by women from African countries described how they formed groups of performance artists to travel to rural villages and educate the community about the dangers of female genital mutilation. Using this unique form of communication, those groups addressed misconceptions about the practice, including the belief that it is a religious necessity or that it eradicates promiscuity. In the process, they were able to educate the community about the health problems and risk of death this practice poses.

The NGO Conference was itself like a giant workshop of continual sharing. Lectures and discussions joined dance, singing, artwork, and an array of cultural activities. Theme tents for various parts of the world spotted the Conference, as did ones for youth, elders, lesbians and bisexuals, peace, and so on. Wherever I went, I found myself with amazing women from all
corners of the planet. I discussed female genital mutilation and the problem of American global ignorance with Katy from Senegal on a bus to opening ceremonies. I debated the role of young women in today’s feminist movement with a Pakistani professor. I shared a Pepsi with a volunteer from Beijing University as we exchanged our hopes for a career after college. With each encounter, my experience at the Conference deepened.

The interaction between women from such diverse backgrounds was incredible, yet it did not come without conflict. At a particular workshop I attended, a discussion between Israeli and Arabic women erupted into furious accusations and weeping. As the fighting escalated, a voice of wisdom and eloquence in the crowd asked, “If we, as women of the world, cannot even sit here in this room and listen to one another, cannot even begin to search for ways to work with one another, cannot even begin to try to find forgiveness, resolutions, and peace; I ask you, who is going to do it?” While everyone left that workshop in tears, later workshops gave me hope that peace would someday be possible in the Middle East.

The Conference not only provided the opportunity for cultural exchanges, but also for intergenerational interactions. At one workshop I listened to several older women attribute the lack of passion in the feminist movement to young women who have failed to carry “their” torch. They postulated that young women were abandoning the true feminist cause by entering institutions instead of fighting on the grassroots level. In the defense of young feminists, I suggested that while we have much to learn from older feminists, we are not carrying “their” torch because we are lighting our own. The problems and options of young feminists are different that those women before us. While my mother and grandmother fought to enter institutions, these doors are open to me. My challenge is not to enter those institutions, but to change them from within. Today, AIDS and drugs demand attention on the feminist agenda and we must broaden our focus to achieve participation in all levels of society, from grassroots organizing to the highest of governmental policy making. Because older generations have achieved so much and we do not face the economic hardships of our sisters around the world, emerging American feminists can afford to address the more nuanced issues facing girls today, such as low self-esteem. This intergenerational dialogue was new to a conference of this type, and sorely needed. As Misha, a young woman from Australia declared, “The women’s movement is made up of older experience and younger vigor.” Existing movements should open their arms to my generation because while we possess the energy for progress, we need mentors and their experience. By giving young women their international voice, the Conference began to build the bridge between the generations.

When we finally returned to the United States at the Conference’s end, our group was full of hope, empowerment, and enthusiasm. The Conference dramatically changed our lives. We have watched each other charge to the
front of our activist community to share the wisdom of the women we met. Together, we created and published two issues of a girls’ international magazine, entitled GIZ, composed of creative writing, articles, and art from girls around the world. Through writing articles, arranging conferences, working hot lines, and participating in educational and lobbying efforts, we have tried to bring some of the Conference home, in the hope that its importance to American feminism is not lost.

As my fellow delegation members and I prepared to enter college and spread across the country, we reflected on the tools and vision for change that the Conference provided us. Sadly, we realized that each of us must move on to new communities and to new challenges. No longer a group, I know that each one of us will use what we learned at the Conference to continue to fight in our own way, in our own place. While losing my activist community and starting anew has been difficult, I am comforted by the relative smallness of today’s world and the network of women and girls that remain within my reach as a result.
ACROSS BOUNDARIES: THE EMERGENCE OF AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Jennifer Kern

"Watch out! Women are on the move! We disabled women are part of this movement. And nobody can stop us!"1

"Nothing about us, without us."2

"Gonna keep on moving forward...."3

INTRODUCTION

In August 1995, more than 35,000 women representing 189 nations gathered in Beijing, China for the UN Fourth World Conference on Women [hereinafter Beijing Conference] and the NGO (non-governmental organizations) Forum on Women [hereinafter NGO Forum].4 The assembly of activ-

1. Kicki Nordstrom, World Blind Union (WBU), "Resources Are For All of Us," Plenary Address at the NGO Forum, Huairou, China (Sept. 28, 1995).
2. Maria Rantho, Comments at NGO Forum protest, Huairou, China (Sept. 1995). Maria Rantho is a South African disability rights activist and a member of Parliament.
3. Pat Humphries, NGO Forum and Beijing Conference Theme Song.
4. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, [hereinafter Beijing Conference] was actually two parallel conferences. The Beijing Conference took place from September 4-15 and was attended by official country delegates from 189 nation states as well as accredited NGOs. The NGO Forum, held from August 30-September 8, was attended by approximately 30,000 activists and grassroots organizers. The NGO Forum provided an opportunity for participants to network with each other and lobby the official delegates.

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ists at the NGO Forum came together to address the enormous challenges facing girls and women throughout the globe, from gender-based violence to the impact of economic globalization. Since the 1975 UN meeting of women's NGOs in Mexico City which was attended by 5,000 women, the size, role and influence of NGOs has grown steadily as activists have organized grassroots constituencies for social change.

For the first time in the twenty-year history of women's organized participation in UN conferences, hundreds of women with disabilities, representing the often overlooked constituency of disabled women worldwide, joined their non-disabled sisters in Beijing. This was not merely a coincidence. Starting in 1992, feminist disability leaders targeted the Beijing Conference as a means to bridge the gap between the absence of disabled women and their issues at prior UN conferences on women and the growing activism of this constituency. The women's disability movement knew from experience in the Independent Living, Disability Rights and Feminist Movements that to wait for access and change is a doomed strategy. We also knew well that it is we, disabled women ourselves, who best know our needs. Women with disabilities joined the international movement of women focused on the conference in force, prepared to add the ingredients integral to our lives to the giant activist stew of the NGO Forum.

Of the hundreds of women with disabilities who attended the NGO Forum from over thirty nations, about 200 traveled to the Beijing Conference. The goal of the Beijing Conference was to finalize and adopt two documents: the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. The Beijing Declaration is a series of commitments and goals of participating governments. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, The Fourth World Conference on Women, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.177/20 (1995). The Platform for Action, a document formulated by the 189 participating countries that sent official delegates, addresses strategies through which governments can improve the lives of girls and women. Id.

5. Previous UN conferences on women include Mexico City, 1975, Copenhagen, 1980 and Nairobi, 1985, all of which took place during the U.N. Decade on Women (1975-1985). According to disability activist Laura Hershey, she was just one of a handful of women with visible disabilities who attended the 1985 Nairobi conference, even though it was held during the UN Decade of Disabled Persons. Disability issues, including accessibility to the Nairobi conference, were virtually non-existent. Laura Hershey, Comments at International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities, Beijing, China (Aug. 29, 1995). The one major acknowledgment of disability issues at the Nairobi conference was the inclusion of disabled women as an "area of special concern" in the "Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women" report. Thersea Degener, Disabled Persons and Human Rights: The Legal Framework, in Human Rights and Disabled Persons (Theresa Degener & Yolan Koster-Dreese, eds. 1995) (citing Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievement of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace ¶ 296, U.N. Sales No. E.85.IV.10 (1985)).

6. "In 1992, over one hundred disabled women from the Americas to Zimbabwe gathered at Independence '92 in Vancouver, British Columbia. ... At that meeting [exclusively devoted to disabled women's issues] plans were developed to attend the UN gathering in Beijing." Disabled Women's Alliance Press Release (Summer 1995) (on file with author).
specifically to work on issues of particular concern to women and girls with disabilities. U.S. women with disabilities represented the largest contingent, with fifty women attending, most from the San Francisco Bay Area, birthplace of the Independent Living Movement.

Why, one might wonder, would women with disabilities brave the anticipated architectural and attitudinal obstacles posed by China, a country whose government remains notoriously hostile towards human rights, let alone disability rights? For many of the same reasons, thousands of others did, to join with the international women’s movement in the struggle for worldwide gender justice. For individuals with disabilities and representatives of disability organizations, this goal included meeting other women with disabilities from throughout the world; attending a historic one-day International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities sponsored by the World Institute on Disability and Mobility International, USA; educating non-disabled women about some of the issues integral to disabled women; demonstrating that women with disabilities are a vocal and visible constituency of the world’s women despite their perceived invisibility; talking about the Disability Rights, Independent Living and feminist movements with disabled and non-disabled women alike; integrating disability-specific language into resulting documents, including the Platform for Action; and teaching and learning basic wheelchair building techniques.

Each of these objectives would inevitably serve to challenge myths of disabled women as sick, dependent, passive, or tragic survivors. Such stereotypes of disabled women impinge on efforts at self-determination and autonomy, and undermine attempts to change unjust policies that oppress disabled women worldwide. We traveled to China to break such limiting myths and work toward meaningful policy change.

For many women, the NGO Forum was the perfect opportunity to join

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8. Disabled Women’s Alliance, founded by long-time activists, represented the largest component of the disability contingent at the NGO Forum. The U.S. Independent Living Movement called for self-determination, de-institutionalization and equality for millions of Americans with disabilities. See infra at p. 236.


10. The Wheeled Mobility Center (WMC), home of the Whirlwind Network of wheelchair builders, works to teach appropriate technology and wheelchair building skills to people with disabilities in developing countries where mobility is scarce. Whirlwind Women, a project of WMC, seeks to find and support women wheelchair builders internationally. Whirlwind Women representatives attended the NGO Forum to network with interested women.

the international struggle for human rights. The conference reaffirmed that
women with disabilities, representing more than half of the 500 million peo­
ple with disabilities worldwide, must find mechanisms for significant reform
to address the sheer enormity of the problems we face.\footnote{12} Some American
women, beneficiaries of an activist disability rights movement that fought
for civil rights for nearly three decades, felt a responsibility to share those
struggles and strategies for independent living. We knew how much our dis­
abled sisters from developing nations had to teach us, as well. With 20 mil­
lion people world-wide in need of wheelchairs,\footnote{13} the prevalence of the insti­
tutionalization and sterilization of disabled women, and the pervasive
poverty of people with disabilities and discrimination spanning every cul­
ture, an organized international movement of disabled women is a critical
catalyst for positive change.

This article first gives an overview of the U.S. Independent Living and
Disability Rights Movements to demonstrate the context out of which many
activists came to the Beijing Conference. Moving beyond the U.S., the arti­
cle highlights progress in the UN with respect to the international disability
movement, focusing on the organizing efforts of people with disabilities.
This article then explores some of the major issues affecting women with
disabilities with a close look at reproductive discrimination and the expe­
rience of disabled conference participants at the International Symposium on
Issues of Women with Disabilities, the NGO Forum, as well as the Beijing
Conference. The article then assesses the future of the international move­
ment of women with disabilities.

HISTORY OF US INDEPENDENT LIVING MOVEMENT

Many of the American disabled women attending the NGO Forum were
pioneers of the U.S. Disability Rights and Independent Living Movements.
These movements are historically, politically and philosophically linked to
the U.S. Civil Rights Movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. The
transformation of people with disabilities “from caste to class”\footnote{14} and of dis­
ability policy “from good will to civil rights”\footnote{15} did not evolve suddenly but
after a long fought strategic effort by millions of participants. The new

\footnote{12. \textit{United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Overcoming
Obstacles to the Integration of Disabled People} 7 (1995)[hereinafter, UNESCO
Report].

Although accurate data regarding disability had not until recently been collected, the
UN estimates that disabled women comprise 51% of the 350 million disabled people in
developing nations (except for Asia which has more men with disabilities than women)
and 52% of disabled people in developed nations. \textit{Id.} at 8.

\footnote{13. \textit{Id.} at 53.}

\footnote{14. See Robert J. Funk \textit{et al.}, \textit{Disability Rights: From Caste To Class - the Humaniza­
tion of Disabled People}, in \textit{1 Law Reform in Disability Rights: Articles and Concept

\footnote{15. Richard K. Scotch, From Good Will to Civil Rights: Transforming Federal
Disability Policy 15-40 (1984).}
movement demanded independence and community living, not institutionalization; full inclusion, not segregation; disability rights, not special favors.

As the black power, gay and lesbian rights, feminist, and other movements arose to examine the oppressive forces imbedded in American society, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, people with disabilities, too, questioned the attitude that disability was an exclusively medical phenomenon. Scholars and activists with disabilities refuted the very notion of disability as biological in origin. Instead, they joined those who recognized that identity characteristics, like race and gender, are constructs defined more by societal norms and expectations than innately inhibiting qualities. Just as feminists identified institutionalized sexism as a societal evil that devalued women because of their socially defined gender roles, disabled people exposed many of the oppressive institutions and myths associated with living with a disability.

Activists knew from experience that public policy reflecting myths, stereotypes, fears and ignorance about disability, rather than actual physical or mental limitations, posed the deepest oppression defining their struggles. In addition, lack of access to schools, town halls, polling places, recreational facilities and other public accommodations kept disabled people virtually segregated as second class citizens. This further exacerbated public misperceptions. In response, disability activists began to speak out, rally and challenge limiting policies and oppressive attitudes.

For the first time in any significant numbers, people from a variety of disability backgrounds and perspectives acted as a class of people bound by the common experience of discrimination. Thus united, they began to counter traditionally accepted notions of charity and policies of institutionalization with themes of independence, inclusion and pride as part of a movement of people with all types of disabilities. Indeed, pride displaced pity as the dominant theme.

Due in large part to this activism, over the past thirty years, various political, legal and social factors combined to shift the disability paradigm. The prevailing view of disability in the 1960s was one of a charity or medical model, in which dependent and ill “patients,” disconnected from the rest of society should be individually “helped” by means of patronizing policies, including legally sanctioned segregation.

The emerging alternative view regarded disability from a civil rights perspective in which individuals with disabilities recognized that it was the institutional barriers to full participation in society that needed a cure, rather than their physical or mental limitations. As human rights scholar

17. See Funk, supra note 14, at A-1.
18. Sociologist Constantina Safilios-Rothschild aptly describes some of the assumptions implicit in a charity model questioned by the members of the emerging disability rights movement when she writes, “[d]isability, like female gender, becomes all-important and
Theresa Degener writes, "[d]isability was reconceptualized by the activists as a different state of being rather than a tragic deviation from 'normality,' and as a social status vulnerable to discrimination by non-disabled persons."19 The shift from regarding disability as something to fix or cure, to envisioning it as something to accept and accommodate, was critical to the formation of a movement. This process shifted the responsibility for change away from the individual person with a disability, to society at large.

The awareness that individual abilities and problems of disabled persons very much depend on attitudinal, architectural and structural barriers of the environment, and on willingness of society to include or exclude the needs of disabled persons in every designing process, was the crucial factor which turned the disability movement into a civil rights movement.20

An example of this analysis, integrally connected to the Independent Living Movement, is that it is not a wheelchair user's inability to climb stairs or a deaf person's inability to hear that is a problem, but the lack of alternative access, such as ramps, or sign language interpreters. The charity model social expectation is that such a person could not participate (in school, work, social life) because she is unable, passive, pitiful, sick, dependent, weak, etc. Under the civil rights model, by contrast, it is clear that she is systematically excluded by architectural and attitudinal barriers or lack of auxiliary aids, her disability notwithstanding.

Disabled feminists, too, began to address the intersection of gender and disability and its impact on shaping the lives of women with disabilities.21 "Scholars and activists within feminism and disability rights, then, have demonstrated that the experiences of being female or of having a disability are socially constructed; that the biological cannot be understood outside of those contexts and relationships that shape and give meaning to femaleness..."

Judge all-permeating, overshadowing other abilities, talents, and characteristics. The disabled and women are judged solely on the basis of their disability or their female gender and, as a result, are automatically categorized as second-class citizens with very limited chances for self-determination." Constantina Safilios-Rothschild, Disabled Persons' Self-Definitions and Their Implications for Rehabilitation, in THE SOCIOLOGY OF PHYSICAL DISABILITY AND REHABILITATION 39, 42 (Gary L. Albrecht ed., 1976). Safilios-Rothschild's conception of people with disabilities as embodying traits of a minority group, now considered obvious to many activists, was cutting edge scholarship in the mid-seventies.

19. Degener, supra note 5, at 15.
20. Id. at 13.
and to disability." Although intricately involved in both the disability rights and feminist movements, women with disabilities were not welcomed into leadership roles or fully included. Neither men nor non-disabled women engaged directly in the process of confronting the experiences of sexism and able-ism faced by disabled women. The movement of women with disabilities continues to strengthen as we name and confront our historical marginalization within these movements.

As with similarly oppressed groups that found power in collective identity or rallied around their minority status, the social formation of the Disability Rights Movement was both a result of and a major impetus behind legislative and judicial change. Activists lobbied policy-makers to address such basic issues as architectural access, legal segregation in schooling and institutionalization of people with disabilities. Men and women disability rights leaders worked closely with an army of activists to broaden the spectrum of legislative protection for all people with disabilities.

The legal transformation of disability legislation parallels the emergence of a disability rights consciousness. The disability legislative revolution that began with the Architectural Barriers Access Act of 1968 and culminated with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, "the flagship of the disability legislative fleet," is testimony to the work of millions of activists. This legislation, addressing discrimination in, inter alia, architectural access, employment, education, transportation, housing, communications, state and local governments and public accommodations, has grounded persons with disabilities even more squarely as a protected class in civil rights jurisprudence.

A significant outcome of the fight for legal rights for Americans with disabilities is a well organized activist movement that continues to advocate for disability rights and enforcement of existing laws. As the onslaught of attacks on poor and disabled citizens continues, the need for organized resistance grows. The ability of the disability rights movement to broaden and promote its mandate will be critical as its poorest members face income and health benefit cuts.

22. See Fine, supra note 11, at 6.
27. New welfare reform legislation has changed the eligibility criterion for children with disabilities receiving SSI benefits. See Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity
Women with disabilities played significant leadership roles in the U.S. disability legislative and policy revolution. In addition, feminist disability advocates are now joining their skills with those of non-disabled women worldwide to influence the international arena. New networks of women with disabilities, such as Women's International Linkage on Disability (WILD), and those developed in Beijing and Bethesda, continue to broaden the possibilities for international organizing. Here, too, the issues facing people with disabilities are enormous. "In all societies of the world there are still obstacles preventing persons with disabilities from exercising their rights and freedoms and making it difficult for them to participate fully in the activities of their societies." For women with disabilities who face double discrimination, the obstacles are even greater.

MAJOR UN DISABILITY DEVELOPMENTS

UN policies regarding disability related issues are currently undergoing a similar transition to the U.S. paradigm shift discussed above. They are


28. WILD was conceived by women activists from Disabled People’s International (DPI) in 1995 to strengthen leadership support for disabled women.


30. Major developments include:

1971 - UN Declaration recognizing the rights of persons with developmental disabilities, known then as mentally retarded persons. UNESCO Report, supra note 12, at 34.

1975 - UN Declaration recognizing the rights of all people with disabilities. Disability acknowledged as a human rights issue, not merely a social welfare or service issue. Id.

1981 - UN International Year of Disabled Persons. The goal was the “full and equal participation of disabled persons in society.” Rise of disability related international NGOs such as Disabled Peoples' International. Id. at 34, 36.

1982 - World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons (WPA) adopted by the UN. Id. at 34. The WPA on human rights and disability for the first time asked for “an analysis of disabled persons based on a human rights perspective.” Lindqvist, supra note 29, at 65.


1987 - Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Disabled Persons rejected by the UN General Assembly. Degener, supra note 5, at 12.

1992 - UN General Assembly declares that December 3rd of each year will be International Day of Disabled Persons. UNESCO Report, supra note 12, at 35.

beginning to reflect the position that disability is a construct rooted deeply in culture and society, not a biological “problem” to overcome. As Special Rapporteur Bengt Lindqvist describes the “new conceptualization of disability and handicap” that emerged in the 1970s, “[t]his new, dual concept of disability recognizes both the need for support of the individual, and the need for change and adaptation of the surrounding environment and the structures and activities of the general society. As a consequence of this, the disability issue grew much more political.”

More recently, in April 1992, the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation on a “coherent policy for the rehabilitation of people with disabilities.” This was praised by scholars who recognized that whereas this last resolution [1984 UN Declaration recognizing rights of the mentally retarded (sic)] is based on the medical rehabilitation and institutional paradigm of disability policy, the new recommendation adheres to the principle of independent living and full integration into society. . . . This recommendation is exceptionally progressive in that it recognizes the rights of disabled persons to be different.

Currently, no binding UN documents or conventions focusing solely on the human rights of people with disabilities exist. However, there are “declarations on disabled persons (on mentally retarded persons (1971), on disabled persons (1975) and on mentally ill persons (1991)). . . .” The non-binding United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, or “Standard Rules,” and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to monitor them are some major mechanisms in place for disability advocacy.

Seeking support for disabled women throughout the world, Mobility International U.S.A. leader, Susan Sygall, addressed the UN Commission on the Status of Women before the Beijing conference in 1995 as part of the

31. Lindqvist, supra note 29, at 64.
32. Degener, supra note 5, at 35-36.
33. Id. at 36.
34. Id. at 12. In 1987, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Disabled Persons was rejected by General Assembly. Id.
35. Id. at 18.
37. In addition to the Standard Rules, UN agencies that formulate policy relevant to disabled people include: International Labour Organization (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO), United Nations International Children’s Education Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP). These agencies have their own conventions and recommendations, some of which are disability focused. Degener, supra note 5, at 20-31.
Disabled Peoples’ International Women’s Committee. Sygall urged governments to implement the Standard Rules: “As of December, 1993, we have a powerful human rights instrument, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. This . . . must be implemented by every government in the world.” 38 These governments have “for too long excluded girls and women with disabilities from decision making, policies, social services and education.” 39

The Standard Rules reflect themes of independence, accessibility and equal opportunity for people with disabilities to live full and meaningful lives as citizens in their communities. “Persons with disabilities are members of society and have the right to remain within their local communities. They should receive the support they need within the ordinary structures of education, health, employment and social services.” 40

Feminist disability activists are utilizing existing structures like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 41 and the Standard Rules to integrate women’s and disability issues, with varying degrees of success. In doing so, they are following the example of feminist activists who now use the UN institutional mechanisms to advance a progressive agenda for social change internationally. 42

An example of successful, albeit delayed, advocacy for disabled women was the passage of the following General Recommendation by the CEDAW Committee recommending that:

State parties provide information on disabled women in their periodic reports, and on measures taken to deal with their particular situation, including special measures to ensure that they have equal access to education and employment, health services and social security, and to ensure that they can participate in all areas of social


39. Id.

40. Standard Rules, supra note 36, at ¶ 26. In the Preamble, the Standard Rules recall other human rights instruments. Id. This enables the Standard Rules to be interpreted, not in isolation, but in conjunction with many binding UN conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Degener supra note 5, at 16-17. This recall broadens the potential impact of the Standard Rules considerably.


42. See Elisabeth Friedman, Women’s Human Rights: The Emergence of a Movement, in WOMEN’S RIGHTS, HUMAN RIGHTS 18, 19 (Julie Peters & Andrea Wolper eds., 1995). “Women’s human rights activists have come to recognize the power of the international human rights framework, which lends legitimacy to political demands, since it is already accepted by most governments and brings with it established protocols.” Id. at 19. “From the groundswell of women’s mobilization around human rights issues at the local level, to the inclusion of women’s human rights within the Vienna Declaration, a global movement for women’s human rights has definitively taken shape.” Id. at 31.
and cultural life.\(^{43}\)

Although modest in scope, this recommendation is testimony to the efforts of disability activists to move their agenda forward by networking with feminist NGOs and using other existing structures such as CEDAW. It is vital that women with disabilities continue to educate and organize even more ambitious strategies to address their issues. As disability-focused NGOs continue to develop mechanisms and build networks, and disabled women educate feminists currently engaged in human rights work about disability issues, the potential for global social justice for disabled girls and women worldwide will be greatly improved. This is why meaningful access to UN events and international meetings for women with disabilities must be a priority for all women working for human rights. We disabled women must continue to share information, skills and strategies to effectively counter existing discriminatory policies and lack of societal support systems.

**WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES**

Why organize around issues of women with disabilities? Without a great deal of pressure, neither the disability rights nor international feminist movements has been historically inclusive of the particular needs and concerns affecting disabled women, who confront both sexism and able-ism, often compounded by racism and class-ism. This phenomenon of “double discrimination,” endemic to the experience of disabled women, along with a lack of visible and strong role models, lead to “rolelessness.”\(^{44}\) The result is often “that the disabled woman lives as a kind of social nomad. There is no place in society that she can call her own.”\(^{45}\)

The stakes are very high for women with disabilities throughout the world. Negative attitudes about disability are universal and often lead to denial of the basic human rights of disabled girls and women.\(^{46}\) These include barriers to adequate education, income, literacy and even survival.\(^{47}\) The combination of male preference in many cultures and the universal devaluation of disability can be deadly for disabled females for whom an unproductive life is probably expected.\(^{48}\)

For the more than 250 million disabled women and girls worldwide, the

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45. Id.
47. Id.
48. See e.g., IDEAS PROJECT 2000, supra note 46.
negative socio-cultural and political impact of having a disability can not be overestimated. They face low expectations and discrimination from societies that explicitly devalue the well-being of both women and people with disabilities who remain entrenched in poverty and isolation.

Two Ugandan women with disabilities describe their experiences as follows:

The disadvantages of disabled women begin in childhood, because parents look on their disabled daughters as a curse from God. As in any other African society, all girls have very little chance to go to school. They are to stay at home, help their mothers in household activities, get married and bring cows and wealth to the family. The situation worsens when you are disabled. First of all, there is no hope of you bringing cows and other material wealth to the family, since it is widely believed that you will not marry because you are disabled. As if that was not enough, parents say they won’t waste their money sending disabled children to school when they don’t have enough resources to send their able-bodied children.

While the topic of ‘women’ is high on the agenda of so many nations worldwide for discussion (though sometimes this is cosmetic), while disabled women are talked of as facing a double disadvantage of being female and disabled, I feel that disabled women in developing countries like Uganda face triple disadvantage: that is, being female, disabled and poor.

A CASE STUDY: REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS, EUGENICS AND SELECTIVE ABORTION

An example of an insidious and destructive phenomenon disabled women face throughout the world is the limitation to reproductive freedom and choices. As shocking as it may seem to imagine eugenics laws in industrialized nations in 1997, eugenic sterilization laws are not uncommon. In fact, such laws existed in more than one half of the states in the U.S. before World War II for institutionalized Americans. According to one scholar, more than 60,000 people have been sterilized in the U.S. in this century under involuntary sterilization laws. If disability activists focused exclusively on reproductive health issues in their local communities, there would still be an enormous amount of advocacy and education to be done everywhere.

50. Id. at 28 (quoting Sylvia Nalule of Uganda).
52. Id. As late as 1985, nineteen states had laws permitting sterilization of people with cognitive disabilities. Id.
Often isolated and without knowledge of a disability rights network, disabled women face involuntary sterilization and restrictions on the right to have, adopt and keep children, and lack of access to adequate and appropriate gynecological services, such as basic birth control information. For poor and/or institutionalized women with disabilities, the risks of no treatment and mistreatment are higher.

Selective abortion is a related reproductive rights issue of great concern to feminists with disabilities. Today, in both industrialized and developing nations with access to reproductive technology, there is growing acceptance and often not-so-subtle pressure to utilize selective abortion if a fetus is considered "imperfect" by medical professionals' or society's standards.

Until recently, legislation in Japan permitted sterilization of people with disabilities to "prevent the increase of the inferior descendants." In fact, the construct of 'defectiveness' permeates most cultures and threatens both the rights of disabled women to procreate and the very existence of children born with disabilities. Due to the efforts of disability rights activists in Japan, the "eugenic section of [the Eugenic and Maternal Protection Law] was expurgated. . . . [T]his revision is the result of many years of lobbying and

53. See e.g., Marsha Saxton, Why We Need People with Disabilities Involved in Reproductive Rights, in A NEWSLETTER FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP/DISABILITY ACTIVITIES (WILDA), 1995 (on file with author); Anne Finger, Claiming All of Our Bodies: Reproductive Rights and Disability, in TEST-TUBE WOMEN, supra note 21, at 285; DIS-ABLED WOMEN'S NETWORK [hereinafter DAWN], Fact Sheet on Reproductive Rights (on file with author).

54. In Uganda, women with very minor disabilities such as a limp are routinely given Cesarean sections with no apparent medical rationale. Interview with Florence Adong, Disabled Women Network and Resource Organization of Uganda, in Limuru, Kenya (Jan. 16, 1997).

55. See e.g., Saxton, supra note 21; Adrienne Asch, Reproductive Technology and Disability, in REPRODUCTIVE LAWS FOR THE 1990S 69, 79-80 (Sherrill Cohen and Nadine Taub eds., 1989); DAWN, supra note 53; Saxton, supra note 53 ("the vast majority of adoption agencies still do not consider disabled people as prospective parents for either disabled or non-disabled children.").

56. See e.g., DAWN, supra note 53; Finger, supra note 53, at 283-86.

57. See generally, DAWN, supra note 53. Female Genital Mutilation, a form of cultural violence that often causes physical and mental disabilities, is performed on thousands of children every day. See Nahid Toubia, Female Genital Mutilation, in WOMEN'S RIGHTS, HUMAN RIGHTS, supra note 42, at 227-29; UNESCO Report, supra note 12, at 11.

58. See generally, ANNE FINGER, PAST DUE: A STORY OF DISABILITY, PREGNANCY AND BIRTH (1990); Asch, supra note 55; Finger, supra note 53, at 283-86; Saxton, supra note 21; Finger, supra note 21.


60. See UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC, HIDDEN SISTERS: WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC REGION 1 (1995). "It is not unknown for children born with congenital disabilities to be killed or left to die." Id.
These attitudes, customs and policies are not isolated in Asian countries, as disability rights activists know all too well. With respect to European attitudes:

"[t]he prevailing concept of prevention of disability in European countries is based on the assumption that it is better not to live than live as a disabled person. Thus, the national prevention focus is on genetic counseling and/or prenatal diagnosis followed by selective abortion if deemed necessary."\(^\text{62}\)

Disabled feminists have for years taken exception to the pro-choice movement's use of health of the fetus and fear of birth "defects" as an acceptable and understood rationale for abortion.\(^\text{63}\) For pro-choice disability activists, the right to an abortion must depend unequivocally on a woman's choice, not subjective medical criterion about who or what is worthy of life. As Fine and Asch have written: "[o]n the basis of women's rights, alone, abortion must be safe, legal and funded—not to rid our society of its 'defective' members."\(^\text{64}\) With the proliferation of amniocentesis as a standard medical procedure coupled with negative stereotypes about disability in the health care industry, cultural expectations of disability as tragedy often determine who should live and die.\(^\text{65}\)

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61. DPI WOMEN'S NETWORK, EUGENIC IDEOLOGY IN GENETIC TREATMENT (1997).
62. Degener, supra note 5, at 24 (citing G. Pinet, Is the law fair to the disabled?, in WHO REGIONAL PUBLICATIONS (European Series No. 29, 1990)).
63. See Finger, supra note 21.
65. Similar issues arise with physician-assisted suicide and the right to die movement. Advocates, such as the notorious Dr. Jack Kevorkian, assume that disability will inherently cause suffering and do not take into account such factors as the cultural or social context of the individual, including poverty, isolation or lack of adequate medical care. His rationale for "helping" severely disabled people die abounds with the mythology of disability as a purely biological phenomenon.

With increasing economic recession the situation deteriorates, since disabled persons are among the first who are accused of being a burden to society and thus become targets of severe economic cutbacks. It is within this context that the newly emerging debates on 'euthanasia' and 'selective non-treatment of disabled infants' have to be analyzed. The more intense the discussion becomes in many countries, the clearer the social-economic implications of these debates are revealed.

Degener, supra note 5 at 24-25.

Against this backdrop of "rolelessness," social isolation, reproductive danger, and double or triple discrimination, 200 women with disabilities and their allies from over thirty nations met at the first International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities outside of Beijing the day before the opening ceremony for the NGO Forum. This meeting marked the largest international gathering of women with disabilities anywhere, ever.

The energy and enthusiasm were palpable in spite of the small meeting space, the alleged violation of Chinese public meeting laws and a torrential downpour. The agenda highlighted substantive issues affecting women and girls with disabilities internationally including discrimination in health care, employment and education, as well as self-esteem, sexuality and reproductive rights. A further goal of the meeting was to prepare to lobby official UN delegates for broader inclusion in the final Platform For Action, the official document prepared for government ratification.

Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, French, Chinese Sign and American Sign Language interpreters provided language access as participants tackled the major problems affecting the more than 250 million women and girls with disabilities. Armed with a commitment to the ideals of inclusion, freedom and independence for women and girls with disabilities, activists worked to translate their understanding of these problems into workable strategies for change.

The experience further affirmed that the common struggle of disabled women crosses national boundaries. Across vast differences in nationality, social class, race, religion, sexual identity and age, our common identity as disabled women demands that we resist discrimination by societies and governments that devalue both women and disability.

**NGO FORUM**

The power of the historical symposium, the gravity of the issues and our experiences as activists at home sustained women with disabilities in the following weeks as we fought discrimination in access to the NGO Forum.

67. Id.
68. After a year of communicating with the appropriate authority in Beijing, Symposium organizers were told the day before the meeting that they needed a permit. After scrambling to attain such a permit, they were told the symposium could proceed, although a permit was never allocated to them. Interview with Cindy Lewis, Mobility International U.S.A., in Berkeley, Ca. (Dec. 16, 1996).
69. While there was some inclusion of disability issues in the draft platform which was the existing working document, activists were determined to make further inroads at the September meeting.
Neither the NGO Convenors nor the China Organizing Committee, charged with the logistics of hosting participants, truly addressed how women with disabilities would actually participate in the meetings, events, plenary sessions and workshops. This was inexcusable since the disabled women communicated our access needs to NGO Forum organizers for many months in advance and made ourselves available as resources.\textsuperscript{71} Also, NGO Forum officials and publications stated that accessibility was taken into consideration.\textsuperscript{72}

In fact, no sign language interpreters were provided at the 3,340 scheduled events, no materials in Braille or large print were made available as requested, and there was no elevator access to ninety percent of the meeting places which were held in buildings with stairs. Newly constructed structures had stairs and brand new sidewalks, but lacked curb ramps, making independent navigation by wheelchair impossible. Even disability-specific workshops were held in non-accessible places! In addition, the Disability Tent, one of the Diversity tents for meetings and events, was originally placed at a prohibitive distance from most of the other activities and surrounded by crumbling, inaccessible and muddy pathways. After traveling from every corner of the globe to participate and paying the same registration fee as the non-disabled women, the disabled women were effectively denied access to the conference.

In response, on the second day of the NGO Forum, disabled women defied the proscription on protest outside the “designated area,”\textsuperscript{73} spontaneously erupting in a demonstration on the steps of a prominent building that caught the immediate attention of both the media and the ubiquitous Chinese authorities.

The positive effects of this and ensuing protests by and on behalf of women with disabilities were significant. NGO Forum organizers were alerted to the poor conditions for disabled women and the Disability Tent was subsequently moved. Also, the media attention helped activists with disabilities highlight accessibility as a priority issue and a right, both at

\textsuperscript{71} An activist from Disabled Women's Alliance was told by UN organizers at a preparatory meeting in New York that disabled women could not be accommodated and should not come. Interview with Corbett O'Toole, Leader of the Women's Alliance, in Oakland, Ca. (Feb. 18, 1997).

\textsuperscript{72} According to the Information Packet, “Access for Participants with Disabilities,” distributed by the China Organizing Committee (COC) in the Spring of 1995, “[t]he COC is working as much as possible to provide a barrier-free Forum site.” CHINA ORGANIZING COMMITTEE, INFORMATION PACKET: ACCESS FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH DISABILITIES (1995) (on file with author). The Chinese government’s much-criticized decision to relocate the NGO Forum from Beijing sixty miles away to Huairou four months before the scheduled opening ceremonies complicated, but did not excuse, the poor attempt to include women with disabilities.

\textsuperscript{73} In planning the conference, the China Organizing Committee originally allocated a small area where protesting would be allowed. This original protest area was actually a playground. See Robin Morgan, Dispatch From Beijing, Ms., Jan./Feb. 1996, at 16.
home and at the conference. As the first group to blatantly ignore the absurd limitation on where protests could happen, disabled women empowered others similarly angered by efforts to squelch activism to join the resistance. The restriction was removed not long after this and other demonstrations.

For women with disabilities in attendance, there were less immediate, but equally serious, negative ramifications from the authorities. These ramifications involved overt photo and video documentation of visibly disabled women at the NGO Forum, apparently assumed to be agitators. They were told that the buses they had arranged to transport them the approximately ninety miles to their hotel were suddenly “unavailable.” Also, there were incidents of blatant eavesdropping on conversations during meals at their segregated dining facility as well as room searches. Some of this behavior and other harassment subsided only after a great deal of negotiating by UN staff and disability organization leadership.

“The Forum is more than an event. It is a powerful demonstration of women’s capacity to envision, and to work together to transform the structures that shape our lives as women and as citizens of an increasingly small world.” These words of Irene Santiago, Executive Director of the NGO Forum on Women 1995, reflect the experience of many disabled feminists who attended. Unfortunately, the immediate structure in need of transformation was the NGO Forum and its organizers who effectively relegated disabled women to second-class participants.

Women with disabilities had a significant impact on the NGO Forum, both in spite of and because of the poor accessibility. As individuals, many felt personal disappointment and anger that the planning (or lack thereof) and terrain presented many difficulties that obstructed full participation for disabled women. As a result of the logistical barriers, however, the disabled women and allies rallied as seasoned activists to educate other participants, NGO Forum leaders, and the mass media about accessibility and disability exclusion. The Disability Tent became our alternative site for some relocated meetings and workshops.

Disabled participants know obstacles very well because we successfully navigate in our own communities. Many also fight to create more and better opportunities for others with disabilities, and to defy stereotypes endemic to the disability experience. The international media attention to the struggle for access in Huairou, however, dramatically showed both disabled and non-disabled activists and CNN viewers worldwide just what lack of accessibility means for disabled women everywhere: barriers to inclusion, segregation and second-class citizenship.

74. Other women were treated as “suspects” as well, most notably non-screened Chinese and Tibetan women, lesbians and human rights activists.

The protesting activists received a great deal of support, in addition to the steady interest from news media. Non-disabled western feminists, in particular, seemed to understand, if not rally around, the issue. As several disabled participants later theorized, for once, all participants had a common authority to resist: the China Organizing Committee. After years of educating and challenging members of the U.S. women’s movement about wheelchair access to meetings, materials in alternative formats, sign language interpreters, etc., disabled women were joined with non-disabled women in protest of conference restrictions and inaccessibility.76

This solidarity and support from non-disabled women was an important part of the conference for many disabled women. Official acknowledgment of their difficulties by UN delegates, including U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, then UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, was also significant in highlighting the disabled women’s needs and concerns. Ambassador Albright relocated her only NGO Forum speech to the Disability Tent to ensure access. Mrs. Clinton explicitly acknowledged the struggles of disabled women in her one speech at the NGO Forum. Delegate Geraldine Ferraro referred to disabled women’s issues as one of two priority issues of the U.S. Delegation.77 The principled leadership and frequent visits of Delegate Judith Heumann, Assistant Secretary of U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services and a lifetime disability rights activist, was a major factor in the headway disabled women made in influencing the Beijing Conference, as well. Most significant for the movement, however, were the strong connections disabled grassroots activists formed with each other as they joined forces to challenge existing barriers.

Approximately thirty NGO participants and official delegates represented the constituency of women with disabilities at the Beijing Conference. The representatives, many with disabilities themselves, had expertise or interest in disability policy, facilitating efforts to have a strong impact on the final document. Throughout the eleven day conference, a disability caucus met daily to review strategies regarding priority language and assess the status of their efforts.

As a result of this work and much behind-the-scenes lobbying, women with disabilities made significant strides in institutionalizing their concerns.

76. Disabled women’s solidarity with non-disabled feminists was challenged again in the spring of 1996 as California feminists worked to “Bring Beijing Home.” California Women’s Agenda (CAWA), an entity seeking to implement the Platform for Action in California, steadily resisted accommodating disabled women’s full participation in a three day conference. Despite legal guidelines requiring access and extensive communication with California Women’s International Linkage on Disability (Cal. WILD), the events were not truly accessible for some disabled women. For example, sign language interpreters for Bella Abzug’s keynote address were not certified, that is, fully trained, effectively excluding deaf women’s full participation.

77. Addressing domestic violence was the other priority issue.
during negotiations on language in the Platform for Action. Delegates were successful in negotiating the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities in the document introduction as well as in the context of economics, education, literacy, health, violence, economic capacity/employment, and the girl child. Further mention is made of disability and legal equality and leadership.\textsuperscript{78}

A particularly important victory for advocates of disabled girls and women was the inclusion of the following recommended strategic objective of governments:

Strengthen and encourage the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, paying special attention to ensure non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by women and girls with disabilities, including their access to information and services in the field of violence against women, as well as their active participation in and economic contribution to all aspects of society.\textsuperscript{79}

Delegates were disappointed, however, to lose a battle condemning selection of a fetus based on physical status to accompany the much criticized practice of selection based on sex. Nevertheless, disability rights activists made their mark on the Platform for Action, paving the way for continued advocacy.

**BRINGING BEIJING HOME: FUTURE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT OF DISABLED WOMEN**

Activists agree that the movement to address the critical need for disability rights awareness from a women’s perspective by means of UN and NGO mechanisms is in its infancy. There is a tremendous amount of educating, lobbying, and organizing to be done to improve the human, economic, social, political, and cultural rights of women and girls with disabilities worldwide. Working in coalition with other feminists to urge government implementation of the Platform for Action (and ratification of CEDAW, where necessary) is one way to effectively promote disabled women’s rights.

Moving forward to translate new ideas into actions is another significant way to keep the movement momentum alive. International groups such as Cal. W.I.L.D.,\textsuperscript{80} formed in the wake of the NGO Forum, communicate via electronic mail to educate each other about local and international disability

\textsuperscript{78} See Platform for Action, supra note 4, at \$ 60(a), 73, 82(a), (g), 83(a), 84(k), 102, 107(c), (o), 110(d), 115, 125(m), 127(d), 180(f), (j), 197(a), 209(k), 226, 232(p), 233(a)(b), 259, 270, 272, 278(d), 280(c).

\textsuperscript{79} Id. at \$ 232(p).

\textsuperscript{80} See supra note 76.
rights issues affecting women. Practical applications of disabled women’s activism continue to flourish. In January 1997, six women from Uganda and Kenya participated in an intensive training sponsored by Whirlwind Women, the women’s project of the Wheeled Mobility Center, that teaches low-cost wheelchair building to people in developing countries. Effective networking by Whirlwind Women and the Ugandan Disabled Women’s Network and Resource Organization in Beijing made the successful pilot training possible. The recent publication of “Loud Proud and Passionate: Including Women with Disabilities in International Development Programs” is another concrete example of disabled women sharing information to fund our various projects and promote autonomy.

FROM BEIJING TO BETHESDA

Opportunities like the Beijing Conference, as well as smaller, regional meetings where disabled women can network internationally with other disability activists remain critical to this effort. The June 1997 International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities (Leadership Forum), planned as a follow up to the work in Beijing and Huairou and scheduled after a two-week Institute on Leadership Development, addressed issues of education, employment, technology, advocacy, public education and electronic networking. The Leadership Forum brought 614 women with disabilities from eighty-two countries to Bethesda, Maryland, solidifying the international movement that began in Beijing. The week-long forum provided an uninterrupted opportunity for sharing the stories we live as women with disabilities worldwide. These stories of common struggle shape the foundation of a movement determined to change all societies to recognize the full humanity of disabled women and girls.

For some, the week-long forum began on its highest point with official acknowledgment of U.S. support in Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s keynote address. Albright stated:

All women, whether we have disabilities or whether we do not, are ready to claim our rightful place as full citizens and full participants in every society on earth. . . . If we are to build the kind of future we want, women with disabilities cannot be marginalized, women and girls with disabilities must be empowered. . . . It is the job of governments to create a basis in law and in the community to remove obstacles to the full participation of women and of persons

81. See supra note 10.
82. Loud Proud and Passionate: Including Women with Disabilities in International Development Programs (Cindy Lewis and Susan Sygall, eds., 1997).
with disabilities in the economic and social life of their nations.\textsuperscript{83}

Calling for action in the areas of human rights, violence, education, employment, health care, sexuality, communication, technology and accessibility, forum participants challenge the UN and all governments, as well as disability and women's rights activists, to value and promote the full and healthy lives of more than 300 million disabled women and girls worldwide.

A statement ratified by participants at the closing ceremony concludes: "We hereby re-affirm the establishment of a global sister network among women and girls with disabilities. We affirm our membership in WILD, Women's International Linkage on Disability."\textsuperscript{84}

To paraphrase speaker Laura Liswood, founder of the Women's Leadership Project, change occurs when the unthinkable becomes the impossible, and the impossible becomes the inevitable.\textsuperscript{85} The International Movement of Women with Disabilities has emerged as an inevitable force of global social change. Clearly, the wheels are in motion, and the momentum is great.

\textsuperscript{83} Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Remarks at the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities (June 16, 1997).

\textsuperscript{84} Statement Adopted by the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities, International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities, Bethesda, Md. (June 15-20, 1997).

\textsuperscript{85} Laura Liswood, Keynote Address at the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities (June 16, 1997).