

Susan Wendell  
toward a feminist  
theory of disability



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BUSTER**

Disabled women in society are doubly marginalized; they are neither understood or accepted by mainstream heterosexual society or by feminist theorists. Indeed, according to Susan Wendell, their embodied social reality has been ignored by philosophers and feminist theorists. The main focus of Susan Wendell's article on "Towards a Feminist Theory of Disability" is to use the power of her own experience of going from able to disabled to argue that the voice of the disabled is missing from the standard theoretical arguments that guide medical intervention, philosophical understanding and feminist perspectives.

She offers the reader the novel perspective that disabled people know more about their problems and potential solutions than able bodied philosophers and feminist theorists. Indeed she shows that the patriarchal structure of society that marginalises women's experience is shared by disabled women and that both feminists and disabled women would benefit from a deeper dialogue of their shared, embodied experience of alienation. First, feminist theorists and philosophers construct a theory for disability ignoring the knowledge and experience of disabled people.

That is, feminist theorists have seen the disabled through the lens of secondary sources such as medicine or philosophy. According to the philosophers she consulted to understand the nature of disability, the disabled are identified as "ill, diseased or handicapped." They speak mainly of ethical issues such as what level of disability is necessary to abort a "disabled" fetus. Or what level of pain or disability is enough to justify suicide. As an abled bodied person who became disabled she felt disturbed that her

experience and the voice of those who are disabled are missing from any dialogue about the needs of the disabled.

Feminists, especially, (more than half of the disabled population) struggle with the oppression of being women in a male dominated society. This they share with disabled women. In addition, the disabled also struggle for acceptance and understanding in a society which is structured for the able bodied. To understand how gender and disability fit into the social construction of social reality feminists and philosophers of the human condition need to pay attention to the embodied experience of disabled women.

It is their experience, their voice, that she says will deconstruct the current theories of disability and honour the struggle and eventually liberate disabled women from the limiting framework of the arguments put forward by feminists and philosophers. She seeks to persuade feminist theorists to integrate the knowledge provided by disabled women into feminist theory as a whole. While her own experience informs her perspective she is quick to point out that she relies upon the first hand accounts of other oppressed disabled women in order to see the larger context of which she is part.

Wendell argues persuasively that the disabled are labelled and treated as charitable cases. They are dependent upon the able bodied for their lives. Society takes limited measures to provide the disabled with sufficient resources according to their limited stereotypical perspective. Society also sees disabled people as being a family responsibility rather than a social responsibility. Without really understanding the needs of the disabled from

their own experience, society cannot really assist the disabled person to become a contributing member of society.

In her experience she sees that the special resources the disabled need and are given by society are based on the illusion that everyone is young, strong and able. Much of what the disabled experience as disabling is this lack of understanding the disabled as they really are and not as society forces them to be in their dependent state. Feminists have long argued that their biology in a male dominated society is seen as “naturally” inferior to male biology. Thus, the social construction of reality keeps women oppressed and at a disadvantage.

She argues that feminists need to see that the disabled are part of that argument. To understand the true needs of the disabled is to see that they too share this negative bias and misunderstanding. The world is constructed as if everyone is healthy and most healthy people can't understand the embodied private experience of chronic pain or the limitations the disabled come up against in a world made for the able bodied. Indeed, she argues that the suffering caused by the body and the inability to control the body is “despised, pitied and above all feared” and that this fear is deeply imbedded in our culture.

This is inwardly experienced by the disabled who may or may not have the language to speak about this aspect of society's refusal to understand their experience and thus alienate them even further. They become “other” to society and in this sense of otherness experience a sharper alienation because they cannot share this deep rooted sense of otherness with the able

bodied and often even with their close friends. This sense of natural inferiority has been experienced by feminists and thus they need to integrate their common experience of male constructed identity into feminist theory.

In a society which idealises the body, the physically disabled are marginalised. They are given inadequate resources based on society's misunderstanding of their needs and even the limited resources given to them are seen as a form of charity passing from the idealised abled bodied to the unfit or sick disabled person. Feminists, she argues, understand how the dominant patriarchal culture marginalises their own strengths and forces them to conform to society's standards. But disabled women experience this alienation and inability to fit into the ideal society doubly by virtue of their gender and their disability.

This culturally or socially constructed idealisation of the fit body excludes the experience of the disabled in their relationship to the body. They have been marginalised by society and silenced in the discourse about their own condition and identity. They are silenced by society which both fears the "other" and specifically fears the disabling of the body. In a sense, the disabled body confronts and contradicts the the very notion that the idealised able bodied society constructs. She hopes to change this prevailing misperception.

By listening to the voices of the disabled, Wendell argues that feminists will understand realms of experience that the disabled have access to in ways that the able bodied women does not. Feminist theorists have long argued

against the medical establishment's authority over women's lives and bodies. The same perspective must be argued in the case of disabled women. Like women who have a special knowledge (birth, menstruation) that men cannot share and that society devalues, disabled women also have a special knowledge that women, first, and all able bodied can learn from.

As she puts it, the disabled experience is mirrored in the experience of women who must fight to correct society's false attitudes and perspective about the body and the many forms of social oppression. To listen to the disabled is not only to honour their experience as different and valid, but to expand our awareness of what it means to live in a fully participatory society which honours difference and socially shared values that are true to our inner experience.

In conclusion, the disabled can indeed learn from the feminist struggle to liberate themselves and find true identity in a male dominated society. And what's more, feminists can learn from the experience of disabled women how deeply rooted is the cultural bias against any that do not fit the dominant male structured stereotypes. In this they are sisters with common cause against a common oppressor.