



The Founding Mothers of DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada

by Diane Driedger, PhD

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This report will discuss the women who attended the founding meeting of the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada, June 20-23, 1985 in Ottawa. 2010-2011 is the twenty fifth anniversary year of the organization's founding. I endeavored to interview and write about the 17 women who came together at that meeting from across Canada. I searched for the 17 women through the Internet, disability organizations and word of mouth. I discovered that at least two of the founders have passed away. Some I was unable to locate, while others declined to be part of this project. I interviewed the four women who agreed to be part of the project to understand their biographies and where they were at the time of DAWN's founding. The women are: Pat Danforth, Paula Keirstead, Maria Barile and Irene Feika.

Seventeen women attended the 1985 Meeting (Pelletier, 1985), which was funded by the Department of the Secretary of State Women's Programme and the Department's Disabled Persons Secretariat of the Government of Canada. At the time, there was no national voice of women with disabilities. There was a national organization, Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH), but the specific issues of women were not being addressed there. The greater women's movement in Canada was also not interested in including the issues of women with disabilities. Therefore, there was no forum for women to talk about issues as they related to their experiences with disability.

The 17 women included representatives from all provinces and one territory, Northwest Territories. They had a range of disabilities: 4 women were visually impaired,

1 woman was hearing impaired, 2 women had invisible disabilities and the remaining 10 women had mobility impairments (Pelletier, 1985).

They discussed issues around violence against disabled women, sexuality, parenting and child care, self-image and self-esteem, and access to the women's movement and to services for women. By the time the meeting was over, the women had decided that a national group of disabled women was needed, and that they would stay in touch to create it. The following are the stories of four of the women who attended that meeting.

PAT DANFORTH

Pat Danforth was living in Regina, Saskatchewan in 1985. She was working as the Provincial Co-ordinator of the Saskatchewan Voice of the Handicapped (now Saskatchewan Voice of People with Disabilities). This organization was a member of the national organization, Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH, now the Council of Canadians with Disabilities). Through that national organization and her local organization, she realized that the issues of women with disabilities were not being taken seriously by the mostly male leadership at the time. As Pat reiterates: "We talked about transportation, but we never talked about issues relating to women, for example, child care."

In 1985, Pat was married and had a young son. In order for Pat to be at a meeting she would need to take the bus to the caregiver's house and drop off her son and then pick him up. During this process, she would need to pay additional bus fares. The disability movement did not see this as an extra expense to be compensated. Pat

discovered this one night when her husband already had a meeting and hers was called after his. She had to also find childcare and pay for it. At the time, Pat did not bring it up as an issue in her disability organization in Saskatchewan, as this was generally understood to be the extra cost of parenting. She was involved at the National level as well in the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH), She had not met many women with disabilities who were working within COPOH. Pat jokingly referred to COPOH as the "disabled man's organization" during our interview, saying that she even called it that at the time.

Pat Israel from Ontario and Joan Meister from B.C. invited Pat to attend the DAWN founding meeting in Ottawa in 1985. Pat Danforth had met the two women through her involvement in COPOH at the national level. Pat Israel and Joan Meister explained to her that this meeting was to discuss the issues of women who had disabilities, as this was not on the national agenda of COPOH.

What Happened in Ottawa?

Pat had no expectations of the Ottawa meeting that she was invited to, but she says that she approaches life like that; she does not expect anything and then is not disappointed. Pat was impressed with the diversity of the women with disabilities who attended the 1985 meeting in Ottawa. There were women who could be considered privileged in terms of income and others who were experiencing poverty. In addition, there were a wide range of women with various disabilities and from coast to coast to coast of Canada. They were in their twenties, thirties and forties. Almost all of the participants were Caucasian. Pat felt that it was "wonderful that women with disabilities

wanted to support each other from all over the country.” Pat explained that the meeting was “very much a collective. And that was important to me, because everybody had a voice.”

The participants decided by the end of the meeting that they wanted to have their own organization and they wanted it to be a “network.” Pat explained how she thought of the name “DAWN”:

My one and only claim to fame, after the meeting, when I was back in Regina I kept thinking this is the beginning, the dawning of a new age. I figured out that if we took the ‘D’ from disabled and the ‘A’ from disabled, we would have the symbolism of what we would be. Whenever I hear of DAWN Canada I still see the sun rising.

What Happened After the Founding Meeting?

The women decided that they wanted to stay in touch after the meeting. When Pat returned home, there were no funds for communication among the women from across the country. They discovered, though, that universities had these computer networks that one could communicate through. It was a new “email” resource that they were able to access infrequently through contacts at the universities.

Pat then gathered together women in Saskatchewan to form the DisAbled Women’s Network (DAWN) Saskatchewan in 1986. In order for DAWN to be a non profit organization, they had to incorporate the organization as DAWN. This concerned Pat, as this meant that the original atmosphere and idea of having a truly feminist collective without traditional leadership roles could not happen. The posts of “Chair”,

“Vice Chair”, “Secretary” and “Treasurer” were required for the organization to be incorporated. Pat believes that this set up traditional ideas in women’s minds about power and the only options related to this model were NOT collective type decision making and a nonhierarchal organization. DAWN Canada struggled with this, as did DAWN Saskatchewan—things became a lot more hierarchal. At the time she saw herself as a participant in DAWN and not as a leader. She wanted others to also take responsibility. It’s always easier to say, “Oh someone else can do that...For me, what was functional about a collective was the building of relationships.”

DAWN Saskatchewan focused a lot on peer support. As Pat related: “There was a two day workshop in Regina on women with disability and body image—how you saw yourself in the world and how the world saw you. This built who you were and your self esteem—this was not really like building transportation and human rights issues,” as had been done in the larger male dominated disability movement. The women felt better about themselves and they became involved in the community. They did not necessarily become involved in the disabled persons’ movement. But, they became more politically aware. One woman filed a human rights complaint against an art gallery that was not accessible—it was important for her to be a participant at the gallery. Pat knew another woman who was involved with the city council election in Regina working for a candidate because she/he supported disability issues.

“I think that everything is cumulative, I don’t think it, I KNOW it!” said Pat, in terms of the process of building her self-esteem. She had an outside voice and an inside voice. DAWN helped her to not hold back on her inside voice—she knew she did not have to hesitate. She had something to say of value and it may not be the majority view

but she could say it. Pat reiterated: “When Tracey Latimer was murdered it was important for me to have my outside voice to articulate what her murder meant to me. This was important to me because I was a mother,” said Pat.

On to the Future

“I define myself as a practical idealist,” said Pat. Because of this, she did not have an overall vision of how DAWN could change society.

I thought it’s here; it’s another tool to use in order to raise issues [about women with disabilities]. The women I knew at the time who were involved were along a continuum in how they viewed their own situations. Those who had nothing recognized that DAWN was something. At the initial meeting [of DAWN], one of the participants wanted to go shopping and took me to a store because they had a sale on. She said these scarves were such a good price, \$20.00. I thought that was a lot of money. I remember her buying three or four of them. I don’t think that person stayed involved because she could not see the issues because she had been protected... she was privileged.

Issues around homophobia became somewhat apparent at the founding DAWN meeting, some women did not want to dance with lesbian women; they felt safe only dancing with straight women, like Pat. This issue was never raised, but the issue of accessible washrooms was raised. During the time that she and other disabled women were advocating during the lobby for Section 15 for disabled people to be protected in

the Charter, they agreed that was what most important and never articulated anywhere was that “we needed the right to pee.” Accessible washrooms were very important for women. “Especially for women with mobility disabilities, when you have to go to the washroom, you have to go to the washroom. Unlike men they don’t have an easy out. Someone made these buttons [‘we demand the right to pee’] and I used to wear one.”

In 1987, Pat attended the founding Conference of DAWN in Winnipeg, but she never held a board post in DAWN. She felt that it was a “network” and should not have leadership positions, everyone was a participant. One of Pat’s bibles is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). She believes that women with disabilities learn how to oppress other women through oppressive structures that are hierarchal. It is that sense that one was treated badly, so when one gets power, one treats others badly. “I see this everywhere that I go. Trying to share power is a really hard thing to do. Everyone is uncomfortable with sharing power, because somebody wants to be the boss.”

Pat thinks that there was not enough discussion in DAWN Canada about the power structures and trying to make a “flat organization.” She says that she heard the women say they did not like confrontation and because of that many difficult conversations did not take place. Pat believes for herself, that if she is upset about something that is happening, she wants to tell people before it festers. She thinks this did not happen in DAWN Canada. Instead, there was a lot of “I’m upset with Diane, so I’ll go and tell Mary about it.”

On to the Future

Currently, Pat is involved in a small group of women with disabilities in Victoria where they share information about disability. There is no hierarchy and everyone has a voice. One person volunteers to take notes for each meeting. "I'm comfortable with it because we all have a voice. We have a place to use that we can meet so we do not need to look for resources. We can go through organizations that already have boards in place and can [they] submit this for us."

PAULA KEIRSTEAD

In 1985, Paula had been working in disability activism for awhile and she had just finished working with disabled students at Kwantlen College in Vancouver. She had moved to Winnipeg to take a job with Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) where she did a lot of international travel. She tried to stay in contact with local disabled persons' groups but this was difficult because she was out of town so much. She was in touch with women in Winnipeg, including Elizabeth (Liz) Semkiw. In February 1985, Paula had emergency surgery for a detached retina. When the DAWN Canada meeting was held Paula was just getting into the swing of things after surgery. Liz Semkiw was originally asked to attend the 1985 meeting by the organizers. But, Liz was not well and asked Paula to attend in her stead. Paula felt that "Elizabeth was really their first choice to represent Manitoba, so I wanted to represent her well."

Paula was involved in starting the Consulting Committee on the Status of Women with Disabilities (CCSWD) in Manitoba which was the first disabled women's group in Canada. The CCSWD had some nondisabled women who had been involved in the

women's movement with Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women (MACSW) helping to start and run the group. These women recognized that the doors needed to be opened to women with disabilities. This started to provide awareness raising both to women with disabilities and the greater women's movement in Manitoba.

Paula had learned in her own life and work with disability organizations that women's issues were totally different. For example, disabled women who are mothers might need transportation to get children to day care. "At the time, this is where society was at; it did not really use the gender lens. The women's movement was not that open at accepting women of difference. Organizations like National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) would pick inaccessible locations and would not think about including the perspectives of women with disabilities, as Paula reiterated:

I knew we needed a national voice to have our own self-worth, self-esteem and to make specific recommendations about our needs. As women we needed to get together and strategize about our own well-being. For many women with disabilities they often feel they may not have a place: they may not be able to have children or their appearance is different, or they are receiving less pay than everyone else in our society. Women with disability needed time to build their own image...to say we have a place in the world.

At the time, Paula's own self-worth was rising, She was divorced and making it on her own. Her work-related travel also showed her many new experiences that other women with disabilities might not have had then.

What Happened in Ottawa?

At the meeting there were many types of women with different levels of experience and knowledge. Some were professional women and some were down to earth former hippie types. They talked about the hot issues at the time, such as violence and concern for young girls with disability and self-esteem. “Despite our background, we really found a lot of common ground.” said Paula.

In 1985, Paula was thirty and she thinks she may have been the youngest woman. She felt that the women who attended the meeting were more experienced overall and may have been women who were viewed as leaders. They did mediation and relaxation exercises as they went along and Paula remembers making one up. Some of the women were quite hesitant to share, but they opened up over time as they learned that they had a lot in common.

In planning the 1985 DAWN meeting, Pat Israel and Yvonne Peters had talked with the Status of Women and felt that having this meeting was a partnership with them. The government did not set the agenda—the women controlled the meeting. Paula felt a lot of support from the government staff who worked on the meeting with DAWN. At the time funding was coming from Status of Women and thus, this was seen as a women’s issue, not just as disability—this was important, as the government already funded Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPOH), so why should it fund a separate organization for women? Paula saw her role at the meeting as representing what was going on in Manitoba. She also saw herself as facilitator to make sure that everyone could speak.

Pat Israel was there and she played a leadership role. It was an open floor for people to respond to the issues. They had an agenda with topics to talk about at different times. All the necessary pre work was done so that the women present could confirm that they wanted a DAWN Canada. Pat Israel and Yvonne Peters had done the preliminary work. They said here are some ideas, what do you think?

Regarding the structure of DAWN they tried to think of a model that was more than Robert's Rules of Order. In the end, they opted for a fairly traditional set up because it was familiar, as Paula remembered:

We wanted to ensure as much communication with women in the provinces after the meeting. We wanted a consensus model but we needed accountability too, especially to get funding. We thought we'd try to work on a combination at the outset. We knew that trying to get consensus can slow things down. But still we wanted to make an effort.

What Happened After the Founding Meeting?

“After the meeting I focused a lot more on issues of women with disability and I wanted to put more time and energy into it in Manitoba. I focused more energy and time. I introduced myself as a feminist now.” Paula felt that the meeting gave her more of a sense of worth and she had the right to expect more as a woman. A big piece of the work of women with disabilities was to do public education--they were on a path to teach people about the concerns of women with disability. According the Paula, COPOH, the organization of both men and women, was a bit bewildered; they did not really get it,

even though Pat Israel and Yvonne Peters were involved in COPOH. CCSWD, the disabled women's group in Manitoba helped in organizing that first official DAWN Canada conference in 1987 in Winnipeg.

On to the Future

In the greater disability movement, COPOH began to look at the issues of women with disabilities over time. Paula explained that the women's community

were not very welcoming. They just were not listening to the issues of women with disabilities. We wanted an organization that provided mentoring for women with disabilities, as there had not been any opportunities for that in the greater disability movement. The tone of the organization [DAWN Canada] was very welcoming. . .

MARIA BARILE

In 1985, Maria Barile was in her early thirties and had been studying Social Work and minoring in Women's Studies at McGill University in Montreal. Maria had a very supportive Women's Studies professor who lent her books and advised her on the women's movement and how it had dealt with issues. Maria realized that women with disabilities had issues that were not being dealt with in the women's movement. As Maria progressed in her involvement with the founding of DAWN Canada and Montreal's Action femmes handicapées (Montréal), her professor discussed with her the different stages of the women's movement that she had studied and been through. As Maria

explained, “In discussing the different stages of the women's movement, the professor would give a comparative analysis of where the movement of women of colour was vis a vis the white women , where disabled women were at etc.”

The Women’s Centre at McGill was on the seventh floor of the building with no elevators and it was very hard for Maria to get up there due to her mobility disability. She said that the “women assumed that I was not very interested due to my disability, after a few times of attempting to integrate I just did not go there anymore. I felt invisible; I felt my voice was not really there.” She had already set up a disability resource centre at Dawson College and thought that she might be working there after she graduated. This did not happen, so when Maria graduated from McGill she continued to be involved in women’s issues and political issues in Quebec.

Maria learned that Pat Israel had read a paper that she wrote on women with disabilities for part of her school work at McGill. She does not know how Pat found the paper. Pat contacted Maria for a meeting. Maria then attended a women’s lunch meeting organized at the Montreal meeting of COPOH in April or May 1985. It was organized by and was attended by Pat Israel, Joan Meister and other women who later became founding mothers of DAWN Canada as well. The women of COPOH had been working for awhile to get women’s issues addressed in COPOH and had not made much progress. After the meeting, Maria, Pat Danforth and Pat Israel met with government officials at the Status of Women in Toronto

Pat Israel invited Maria to attend the 1985 founding meeting as a Quebec representative. Secretary of State selected the other women from Quebec whom they already knew—Diane Lemming and Marie-Blanche Remillard. Diane only came to the

one meeting and then did not stay in touch with the DAWN movement. Marie-Blanche worked with the government disability agency in Quebec.

What Happened in Ottawa

The meeting was life changing for Maria: “When we met for that weekend I felt it was so affirming to me. Everything that I had felt about my isolation as a woman with a disability while attending Women’s Studies was confirmed—my views were shared by 16 other women. Wow, I’m not crazy, I’m not alone.” Pat Israel and Joan Meister of BC were very supportive of Maria, who was new to cross-disability organizing. Maria believed that she was invited to the 1985 meeting because of her academic paper and her Women’s Studies views: “It was wonderful in the beginning. We had a collective idea of what we wanted, so we worked together.” She had known disabled women in Montreal, but they never got together to discuss women’s issues from the standpoint of disability. The Ottawa meeting consolidated Maria’s feminist ideology.

At the Ottawa meeting “we agreed we wanted an organization OF women with disability BY women with disability.” They agreed to speak on violence, poverty and health—there were many issues, but these are the ones the women saw as priorities to address. Everyone felt less isolated at the meeting in Ottawa—“being together with other women with disabilities was “a ‘wow’ moment in my life.” Maria shared at the meeting that she had always felt invisible, “non-existent” and that her voice was not heard. Joan Meister said to her, “Well, we’re hearing you now.” Maria reflected: “When DAWN came along, I almost took on a particular identity.” Maria said that it came out at the meeting that most of the women had experienced abuse as children. One woman’s story

stuck with her. This woman was rushed to a hospital when she was pregnant but instead of asking her what she wanted, they asked her mother. Her mother had decided she should have an abortion.

What Happened After the Founding Meeting?

“When I returned home I no longer thought I was ‘nuts’ in terms of my experience of violence and poverty and lack of being heard. I wasn’t crazy to feel the way I felt,” said Maria. Years later, when Maria left DAWN, she no longer feels the same sense of empowerment and self-confidence working on issues on her own: “When you have a voice as a group you are heard more than if you speak as an individual.”

Maria and Marie-Blanche organized the first meeting of women with disabilities at Marie-Blanche’s house. Six or seven francophone women attended. All of them did not feel comfortable with setting up an organization of women with disabilities. One of the women was coordinator of the paraplegics’ association and said she had too much on her plate. Everyone else also said they were too busy, but they thought it was a good idea to have a group if someone else was doing it. Marie felt strongly that she wanted to do it. Marie-Blanche worked on the group for awhile and then left due to employment.

In the end, in 1986, Maria formed a small group with five women that she had recruited. One was a secretary at McGill. Another woman was already dealing with issues of racism in the organization of people with disabilities she was in. “I was in the same group and we both felt very isolated. She called it ‘racism’ and I called it ‘sexism’.” said Maria. Another woman was a friend of Maria’s who had been married and had had an abusive husband, so when Maria talked about issues of violence she could relate.

Maria met a woman from the YWCA who she had worked with before, and this woman provided meeting rooms for them at the Y. “All of sudden all these people were helping for free,” said Maria.

At the same time, Maria became involved in COPOH and met another woman from Quebec, Monique Couillard, from the greater disability movement, Mouvement des Consommateurs Handicapés du Québec, who said ““become a part of Le Mouvement and we can help your women’s group in Montreal.”” So, Maria joined Le Mouvement as well with the blessing of the women’s group and received a lot of help from them. Through Le Mouvement she learned about incorporation, funding etc. In the Spring of 1986, the group was incorporated as Action des femmes handicapées (Montreal) (www.afhm.ca).

Action des femmes handicapées (Montreal) met once a month to talk about different issues. At the same time, Maria was part of the organizing committee to start DAWN Canada. The Montreal group was the second group to be incorporated, after Ontario, where Pat Israel and other Ontario women worked well together to get their organization going. The women’s group, Action des femmes handicapées (Montreal) started as a self-help group. The women needed to talk and bring out their issues and needed to start to trust each other.

At the founding conference of DAWN Canada in Winnipeg in 1987, Joan Meister was elected as President and Maria was elected as the Quebec representative. Maria stayed on the board from 1987-1993. There were also other representatives from Quebec on the board at that time. They had some difficulty with the “radicalism” of DAWN at the time. Maria took a hiatus and then became involved with DAWN Canada in 2003 again, at the request of Joan Meister, to only help in organizing a democratic

Annual General Meeting, at which two women from Quebec were elected to DAWN Canada. Today, she is establishing her own consulting business, Eco-Access, looking at universal design and sustainable development (www.ecoaccess.info). She also works with the Adaptech Research Network (www.adaptech.org). Although, she is not formally involved in DAWN Canada, she is still a member of the Action des femmes handicapées (Montreal) Advisory Board and volunteers on the board of RAPLIQ (www.rapliq.org).

IRENE FEIKA

In 1985, Irene Feika was Chairperson of Alberta Committee of Disabled Citizens (ACDC) and through that she had become a representative to COPOH. She was working full time as the residential Coordinator of the Robin Hood Association for the Mentally Handicapped in Sherwood Park, Alberta. She was fairly busy doing these things. Her oldest daughter was not living at home anymore. “It was me and the dog living at home.” Irene laughed. She received a short notice phone call to attend the 1985 meeting and she does not remember who contacted her. She said that she was recommended by a few people to attend the meeting. COPOH had also planned a meeting at the same time in Ottawa, and she needed to be there because there was a movement to elect her as Vice Chair and then have her run for Chair the following year. She was stunned and did not really feel worthy. She also felt the formation of DAWN was important. So she went back and forth between the DAWN and COPOH meetings. Her main focus was on attending DAWN meetings in the daytime. She told COPOH that because she saw the meeting of disabled women as a momentous happening, she wanted to spend the days

with DAWN. DAWN had few evening meetings. Everyone from DAWN was also invited to the COPOH events as well.

At the time Irene's disabilities were not visible yet. But, she had enough disabled friends to know that if you went to a doctor and were a woman with visible disabilities, you could not get up on the examination table and they might not help you, so you had to go to emergency. She felt this was not right. There were problems in the medical system. A woman might have a spinal cord injury but have other medical issues besides that and doctors tended not to look after those issues. They would just notice the spinal cord injury. Irene was a diabetic and she knew about future complications. She also had arthritis, so she wanted the medical system to be improved for women with disabilities. Most doctors' offices were not wheelchair accessible. Regarding her own situation, Irene said: "Now, my doctor who I've been training from 1983 knows quite a bit about disability issues. He'll call me to get advice about disability issues. But, most doctors are not willing to admit that they might not know everything."

What Happened in Ottawa?

One of the issues that came up at the DAWN meeting was that women could not trust men to understand the issues of women or women with disabilities. Irene disagreed with most of the participants there and "The facilitator came to me after the first day and thanked me for my opinions and asked me not to let the others change my mind. [I believe] we need to have both sides—both men and women." She had disabled men friends who she would trust with her soul. She felt that such a blanket statement was not

right. Irene said that some of the DAWN women outside of the meeting came to her and said “I do agree with you personally, but right now I’m not willing to say that openly.”

The issue was: who should we talk to about our problems? For many women with disabilities just having disability can be detrimental to a relationship. If suddenly your health deteriorates quickly will your partner work with that? That was an issue for Irene because she had two women friends with multiple sclerosis whose husbands left them as their disability progressed. She realized then that men were more likely to leave a relationship over disability, than a woman who was with a disabled man.

In addition, at the time she was becoming aware of women from other cultures, Hindu or Muslim women. “If they become disabled it is easy for the husband to say ‘I divorce you’ and they have no say about it,” explained Irene.

In Alberta, there were strong women in the mainstream disability movement, but sometimes they were afraid to let their voices be heard at the Alberta Committee. At one meeting, Irene had a strong disagreement with a man at an Alberta Committee meeting and he said “I’ll meet you for a drink afterward.” Another woman came to Irene and said “why are you seeing him after your disagreement?” She said that when business is over you can be friends. At that time, Irene felt that a lot of women at that time did not realize that. Women at the time tended to see things very personally. Of course there were men who did put up barriers to participation and there are women like that too, according to Irene.

Irene still remembers one woman’s story in particular from the meeting. There was a woman who was a wheelchair user. She had been in a car accident and had a high break on the spinal cord. When she awoke in the hospital, her husband was sitting next to

her holding her hand, and she thought, “Oh, my husband still loves me.” Then the doctor came in, and she said, “I can still have children can’t I?” The doctor looked at her and said, “You don’t have to worry about that dear, while you were out, we took it all out.” This disturbed Irene greatly as a mother of two daughters herself and as a woman with a disability. “She shared this with a small group of us, not publicly, and I cried. In 1985 we thought we were making headway, but a doctor had done this!” said Irene.

What Happened After the Founding Meeting?

DAWN started to look at a lot of issues that were not looked at then, like how depo provera impacted on disabled women and also how abuse affected disabled women. Irene explained:

Now, with DAWN talking about it, it’s become easier for women to talk about these things, especially because an abusive spouse might be the women’s caregiver and she would not want to speak against him, because what would happen to her then? She relies on him for personal care.

Regarding a DAWN member group in Alberta, there was no interest in forming a group. Irene thinks that is because most of the Chairs of the Alberta Committee have been women in the last 15 or 20 years. They have strong women with strong personalities in the greater disability movement. By 1986, the numbers of men and women involved in the Alberta Committee was fairly equal. The women with disabilities in Alberta felt that their issues were being represented by Alberta Committee.

On to the Future

Irene decided that she would not become an active member of DAWN because she was already active in COPOH. The plan was for her to be the first female Chair of COPOH when she was elected in 1986. Irene felt she was making the right move in her life at that time. Later, when she was elected, she found out that she was the first female Chair of any disabled persons' group in the world. She then became the COPOH representative to Disabled Peoples' International (DPI) in 1986. Irene felt that DAWN Canada wanted a chapter in every province and they wanted to be a separate entity, working with COPOH on some projects at arms' length. Eventually, COPOH changed its membership criteria from just being composed of provincial members to including other national disability groups like DAWN.

“I knew that DAWN was important, because it would affect the lives of all women with disabilities in Canada. I did not think I would be involved further because I was still Chair of Alberta Committee and I was involved at the national level with COPOH,” says Irene. DAWN in the ensuing years would look at issues around women's reproduction and the need for women with disabilities to be educated about their own bodies and sexuality, and this was important and needed according to Irene.

CONCLUSION

The 17 women who met in Ottawa in June 1985 discussed issues around what it meant to be a “woman” with a disability. In the process, as the four women interviewed related, the women present felt understood and empowered. Most of the issues that they

were concerned about had to do with sexuality, violence and self-esteem. In addition, women with disabilities were concerned that other women in the women's movement see them as women as well. The women wanted to not only be seen as "disabled" and this was the primary issue that concerned them at the time. They returned home after the Ottawa meeting and organized groups of women with disabilities in their provinces. The 1985 meeting was the beginning of Canadian women with disabilities gaining a voice that they would continue to speak with for 25 years.

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