

Britain: Reproductive rights and disabled women

Saturday 10 September 2022, by [DANIELS Sandra](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2022).

It is generally recognised that ‘reproductive rights’ are legal rights and freedoms relating to reproduction and reproductive health’ however not only do these rights vary amongst countries around the world, but often certain groups of women are excluded altogether. This is taken from a speech given by Sandra Daniels.

The World Health Organisation defines reproductive rights as follows:

“Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence.”

It is this final right, the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence, that I will mainly focus upon. In doing this I will examine what is understood by the slogan, “A woman’s right to choose” and the notion that “every woman should be a willing mother, every child a wanted child.”

I will do these things not only as a woman but specifically as a disabled woman. I will relate the bigger picture to personal experience. We need to understand that issues related to reproductive rights are some of the most vigorously contested rights issues worldwide, regardless of the population’s socioeconomic level, religion or culture, however all too often disabled women are invisible, discounted, and subjected to prejudice and discrimination.

How impairment and disability are viewed and impact differently on disabled and nondisabled women

Women’s Liberation Movements worldwide have given little attention to the issues disabled women face, especially involving reproductive rights and mothering. These movements have on the whole shared the attitudes, values and assumptions of wider society; namely, disabled women are asexual: person who has no sexual feelings or desires, or is not sexually attracted to anyone.

These assumptions have affected the provision of disabled woman’s access to reproductive health care, contraception information and whether or not they are considered capable mothers’.

Historically, disabled women have been coerced into oppressive situations by, for example, the lack of personal support; denial of the support they need to parent their children; professionals forcing

their medical opinions on them and concerned family taking over. All of these things have resulted in disabled women being subjected to sterilisation, abortion against their will and having to give up and often losing their children through child custody cases.

How disability is understood is contested, even among feminists

Within the UK disabled people's movement, disability is viewed from a social model perspective. The social model sees barriers and other social restrictions present within society as the reason disabled people are excluded and discriminated against, but it's vital to understand and address the fact that exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination are the cause of disabled people's social oppression and this impacts upon disabled women in ways disabled men don't experience.

This is also true when considering the experiences of younger and older disabled women; disabled lesbians, trans-gendered disabled women, and those from differing cultural backgrounds. What this means is differing forms of oppression can intersect.

As a disabled feminist and activist, I recognise the accomplishments of the women's liberation movement and its significant achievements. I will work alongside and stand in solidarity with the women's liberation movement, but I will also be calling for inclusive practice, the participation of disabled women and for the oppression, they experience to be recognised and eliminated.

Over the last 30 years, women have known more about the health of the baby they are carrying than ever before, due to screening during pregnancy. This has given women information, but has it given them more choice?

Some societies have anti-discrimination legislation, however, laws do not change how within capitalist societies the existence of impairment or disability is viewed from a tragic perspective. As a result, disabled people are not valued as productive members of society, but are seen as burdens.

When a woman finds out she is expecting a baby labelled 'disabled', the information often given to her reinforces the view that the child will be continuously dependent and with the prospect of being the responsibility of the parents, mostly the mothers, for the rest of their lives. Austerity has highlighted the lack of resources to support families with disabled children and disabled adults to live independent lives.

The discovery of a fetus with an impairment often leads to a medical termination being offered and can be undergone at any stage of pregnancy.

Of course, I advocate for women's right to choose, but what kind of choice is it if conditioned by ideological or material pressures? What is an informed choice within a disablist society?

Personal experience as a disabled woman

I was born in 1963 having a congenital impairment called *Spina bifida*. My mother had no knowledge of my impairment before I was born and was shocked and distressed at giving birth to a disabled baby. She was given the worst-case scenario by the medical profession and was told that my life expectancy was unknown. My mother spent the first few years of my life expecting me to die.

As the years passed it became clear the predictions and assumptions made were not necessarily accurate and this helped to increase her confidence as a mother of a disabled child and she was able to progress and think of ways that I could be independent and live the life I wanted.

When I reached adolescence my mother wondered if having children of my own would be possible,

so arranged for me to see a medical specialist for advice on my reproductive situation. The specialist's advice was for me not to have children, as this could potentially result in increasing my impairment and miscarriage.

When I become pregnant with my first child it was a tense time for all concerned and I was advised by a doctor to have an abortion, but I wanted to have my baby and nothing was going to stop me. My first child was a girl and several years later I went on to have a boy. My children are now grown up and I am the grandmother to five grandchildren.

When I was in my 20s my mother told me that the day I was born at one time seemed one of the worst days of her life, but she had grown to realise it had been one of the best because she had a daughter in her life.

To finish off I'd like to read a quote by Ani DiFranco

"My idea of feminism is self-determination, and it's very open-ended: every woman has the right to become herself, and do whatever she needs to do."

Sandra Daniels

P.S.

• Anti*capitalist Resistance. 09 Sep 2022 :
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/reproductive-rights-and-disabled-women/>