

## Chapter 7

### **DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY: PATTERNS OF ABLEISM IN THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT<sup>i</sup>**

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#### **Abstract**

Intersectional analysis, amongst both scholars and social movement activists, has historically focussed on gender, race and class, this has meant that other axes of oppression, such as disability, have remained relatively marginalised (Erevelles 2011). This chapter explores the extent to which disabled women and disability-related issues and interests are included within the UK women's movement. The empirical research draws upon analysis of two large women's civil organizations, and a women's disability collective. The study finds that although the wider women's movement is making steps towards including disabled women and addressing disability-related issues, including via calls for a pedagogy of intersectionality, disabled women themselves do not feel included; indeed, they perceive the wider movement to be ableist and infused with able-bodied and able-minded privilege. The chapter argues that a politics that challenges ableism is required in order to address the marginalisation of disabled women.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Intersectionality provides a critical tool for understanding how difference affects women's lives (Crenshaw 1991; Combahee River Collective 1974). Offering a framework for theorizing oppression and marginalization, intersectionality enables us to identify structural intersections within power dynamics, whilst acknowledging individual experiences of

difference (Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectionality can also be considered a social movement strategy (Verloo 2013), albeit one that raises various challenges for activists (Laperrière and Lépinard 2016). Exploring how, when and where social movement actors choose to engage with intersectionality and the politics of privilege, can reveal patterns of marginalization, conflict and/or cooperation (Evans and Lépinard, this volume). Whilst women's movement actors have increasingly sought to engage with intersectional politics, the emphasis has remained focused upon the three 'original' signifiers: gender, race and class (Erevelles 2011).

It has been over twenty years since scholars such as Nasa Begum (1992) and Jenny Morris (1996) explored the intersections between disability, race, gender and feminism in the UK; revealing the numerous ways in which disabled women<sup>ii</sup> were marginalised and excluded from political debate and participation – both within the disability rights movement but also from within the women's movement. Morris observed that a women's movement which included the issues and interests of disabled women would require a radical rethink of feminist "terms of analysis" (1996, 7); arguing that including the experiences and perspectives of disabled women would result in a more explicit feminist resistance to oppression. Incorporating disabled women's varied epistemologies would provide a more meaningful engagement with the politics of difference and would necessitate a critical engagement with able-bodied and able-minded privilege.

Despite being a well-known social and political category of difference, disability receives little attention from scholars, or activists, looking to explore inter or intra-movement intersectional politics (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Erevelles 2011). Drawing on feminist disability scholarship, and in particular theoretical work on ableism, this chapter explores

how, when and where disability features within the UK women's movement. Based upon original empirical research undertaken with disabled women activists and two high profile women's organizations, the chapter reveals that whilst the women's movement is in some respects attempting to adopt an intersectional framework in order to become more *inclusive* of disabled women (Evans and Lépinard, this volume), in particular through attempts to adopt a pedagogical approach to intersectionality, which incorporates disability, disabled women feel that the movement is inherently ableist.

The research raises wider questions for social movement scholars regarding the ways in which we analyse, understand, and classify intersectional praxis. By comparing different types of feminist organisation, the study reveals that discursive commitments to intersectionality are not always sufficient to address ableist politics or able-bodied/able-minded privilege. The research identifies three key critiques that disabled women activists make with regards the wider women's movement: 1) it is *ignorant* with regards disability; 2) that where disabled women are included this is simply *tokenistic*; and 3) that there is a *failure to engage reflexively* on organizing strategies and accessibility. The chapter begins by reviewing some of the key ideas within critical and feminist disability scholarship, paying particular attention to the concept of ableism; the chapter then briefly sets out the methodology employed, before presenting and analysing the empirical data.

## **DISABILITY, FEMINIST DISABILITY AND ABLEISM**

It is difficult (and arguably undesirable) to offer a precise definition of disability, given its discursive, juridical and political fluidity. Although all identity markers are open to contestation (Marx Ferree 2009), approaches to disability in particular have been characterised by conflicting, contradictory and overlapping definitions and models (Davis

2006). Historic and contemporary medical-scientific approaches have established discursive frameworks and classificatory systems, which in turn have exerted social control over the minds and bodies of disabled people (Tremain 2015). In these analyses disability is posited as an individual problem to which a solution must be found. In UK Law, a disability is considered a “physical or mental impairment” that “has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [a person’s] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities” (Equality Act 2010). Such an individualist account of impairment negates the role of society in creating and sustaining disabilities and in particular the historical and material context within which disability/ies are produced.

### *Disability*

The social model of disability rejects an individualist or medical-based approach to disability (Oliver 1983) and has had a profound impact on the UK disability rights movement. The social model describes how society disables people. Instead of focusing on ways to treat, cure or manage an individual’s disability/ies, the emphasis is on changing society so as not to disable people. The most obvious example is that of wheelchair users, who might be impaired but not disabled in a world in which everyone used a wheelchair and no one built stairs (Siebers 2006, 12). Proponents of the social model argue that it facilitates activism because, it calls for a unified community of disabled people (Shakespeare 1993). The social model analyses the obstacles that prevent equality and perpetuate cultural discrimination (Morris 2001), whilst emphasizing the fluid nature of disability, as Tobin Siebers observes, “the nature of disability is such that every human being may be considered temporarily able-bodied” (2006, 11).

### *Feminist disability*

Whilst feminist disability scholars have had sympathy with the social model, they have also critiqued its failure to adequately incorporate gender into its analysis (Wendell 1989; Lloyd 1992). Creating a unified disability rights movement is at the core of the social model approach, rendering attempts to adopt an intersectional approach contentious (Vernon 1999). Accordingly, feminist disability scholars have played an important role in revealing the intersections between gender and disability (see Fawcett 2000 for an overview). Drawing on Foucault, writers have identified the historic links between the treatment of women and disabled people in paternalist capitalist systems (Miles 1988), in which medical professionals have sought to eliminate or discipline women's bodies (Sherwin 1992). Disabled women, especially migrant women, deemed biologically inferior to non-disabled women have had their reproductive rights curtailed, for instance through enforced sterilization, and they are at increased risk of having their children removed from their care (Silvers 2007). Whilst feminist disability scholars have brought a gendered lens to disability, they have also raised contentious questions for the wider feminist movement, particularly regarding care<sup>iii</sup> and reproductive rights.<sup>iv</sup> Observing that these 'difficult' issues are too often overlooked by feminist activists, Lloyd argues that disabled women struggling to "locate themselves within organizations whose theoretical and ideological base is for them inadequate or partial" (1992, 218).

For those interested in pursuing an intersectional analysis, a materialist feminist account of disability offers a useful analytical framework. Such an approach delineates the ways in which bodies and minds not only matter to understanding disability politics, but are constituted along gendered, racialized and classed lines, called into being by capitalist systems (Inckle 2015; Erevelles 2011). Building on this, Price develops the concept of the "bodymind", which she defines as "socio-politically constituted and material entity that

emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience.” (2015, 271). The theoretical links to intersectionality are clear: the interconnectedness between body and mind and the subsequent effects of impairment on the lived experiences of gendered, racialized, classed, nationalised disabled people have material consequences that require political attention and action. Indeed, “disabling attitudes, stereotypes and policies” all but guarantee that disabled people remain amongst the most economically disadvantaged in society (Vernon 1999, 388). In order to theorise such a material context, scholars and activists have developed the concept of ‘ableism’ to refer to a set of beliefs and attitudes that privilege the able-bodied/able-minded.

### *Ableism*

Ableist ideology infuses our institutions and social relations (Chouinard 1997), revealing itself in the belief that a disabled person is not only defined by their disability but that they are essentially inferior to non-disabled people (Ho 2008); as such, disabled people occupy an abject or “diminished” position in society (Campbell 2001, 44). The drive for “compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 2002), has led to both the pathologisation of disability, and conterminously, to a practice wherein disability is “unthought”, a process by which disabled people constitute spectral visions at the peripheries of society (Campbell 2009). Despite the pervasive nature of ableism, Linton suggests that there is little consensus regarding the specific behaviours or discourse that might be deemed ableist, because “the nature of the oppression of disabled people is not yet as widely understood” (2006, 161). Thus, ableism is underpinned by a pervasive able-bodied/able-minded privilege.

For disability rights activists, ableism is analogous to other systemic structural forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism or homophobia. Whilst ableism has been a particularly

useful means by which to name the oppression of disabled people, it is also true that unlike other structural forms of oppression it has not had a significant purchase within wider society (Goodley 2014). The material effects of ableism are such that there is an effective “removal and/or erasure of disability” in spaces that claim an inclusive agenda, requiring disabled people to assimilate in order to be included (Erevelles 2011: 33). For social movements, able-bodied/able-minded privilege can therefore be identified where little thought has been given to issues of accessibility either with respect to discourse, campaigns or to the range of tactical repertoires adopted.

Such privilege also manifests itself in the default assumption that the object, and subject, of analysis is based upon the experiences and abilities of non-disabled people (Goodley 2014). Even when non-disabled people are the subject of political enquiry, there is typically a failure to recognize the varied forms of ableism, for instance biological-based ableism or cognitive-based ableism (Wolbring 2008), which results in a stereotypical idea of what constitutes a disabled person. For social movement activists, a failure to address either the exclusion or the homogenization of disabled people, will reinforce ableist logic (Inckle, 2015). Drawing upon ideas of ableism, this research explores these themes with regards to the inclusion of disabled women and disability-related issues in the UK women’s movement; in so doing the research reveals the wider need for social movement actors to challenge privilege framed by ableism.

## **METHODS**

Analysis of intersectionality within social movement activism typically involves close study of specific groups and campaigns, in order to identify the extent to which different types of organisation, and organising, are more conducive or resistant to intersectional frameworks (see Bonane, this volume; David, this volume; Labelle, this volume). This research evaluates

how disabled women, their issues and interests are included within the UK movement, specifically through analysis of three key groups: Fawcett Society; Sisters Uncut; and, disabled women's collective Sisters of Frida.

Fawcett Society, the largest women's civil society organization in the UK, was established in the mid-nineteenth century to campaign for women's rights. Fawcett is a membership organization which undertakes national high-profile campaigns as well as organizing around the country in local groups. Fawcett can broadly be defined as a liberal feminist organization, seeking to work through official political channels to effect change; whilst critics have identified a lack of radicalism (Dean 2010), it has at times sought to strike a more defiant tone, for example it sued the government for failing to take account of gender in its austerity measures. The organisation is viewed by some (especially younger) feminists as part of the establishment (Evans 2015) which at times seems at odds with an increasingly radical (Mackay 2015) and queer (Chamberlain 2016) UK women's movement. The research draws upon analysis of the organisation's policy documents and briefs, campaigns and qualitative data gathered from those involved with policy making and events organisation.

Sisters Uncut are a grassroots direct-action group established in 2014 as an offshoot of anti-austerity group UK Uncut; they were formed by, amongst others, domestic violence survivors in order to defend women's services from austerity (Guest, 2016). Since then they have expanded and now include a number of groups across the UK. Their high-profile tactics have attracted attention for the causes that they champion; for example, they have reclaimed highly visible public spaces, such as Holloway Prison (the former women's prison) and poured red dye into the fountains at Trafalgar Square (to symbolize blood), in order to call attention to the violence against women wrought by cuts to women's services. Sisters Uncut were formed



in a feminist landscape that was increasingly seeking to address intersectionality. Whilst the context within which they were formed does not make it automatic that they would choose to adopt an intersectional approach, their lack of historical baggage, in comparison to Fawcett, has made it easier for them to pursue an intersectional praxis. Exploring how they address disability within their work is based on analysis of their organising principles, actions and campaigns.

Neither Fawcett nor Sisters Uncut identify themselves as an organisation run specifically in the interests of disabled women; whilst there are undoubtedly disabled women active in both organisations, it is important to ensure that the views of those who are active on issues surrounding disabled women are central. As such, the last strand of the research focuses on Sisters of Frida, a disabled women's collective, and includes a qualitative survey undertaken with 24 of its activists (they do not have a membership list). Sisters of Frida, named after disabled feminist artist Frida Kahlo, is, according to its website, an "experimental collective of disabled women" who share experiences and challenge oppression.

Established in 2014 to fight for disabled women's voices to be heard in "diverse places of influence", the group seek to highlight the interconnectedness of structural forms of oppression. Activists were asked about their experiences of the UK women's movement; how inclusive they considered the movement to be and how the movement could improve. Accessibility was the primary concern, so an online form was used with the questions written in plain English. Follow-up questions were conducted via email correspondence. The responses of the activists are not intended to provide a representative sample but rather serve to highlight the views of disabled women activists. Informed by intersectional theory, this research recognizes the diverse experiences of disabled women, not just in terms of the

impact of cross-impairments but also how their experiences are refracted through their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, language, immigration status and age; in short it seeks to avoid creating a “typical disabled woman” (Silver 207, 132). Finally, it is important to note that I am not a disabled woman. Whilst I have sought to prioritise the voices of disabled women within this chapter, I recognise that there might be instances of ableism that have not been apparent to me as a non-disabled woman.

### **CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO DISABILITY**

Fawcett Society (FS) and Sisters Uncut (SU) differ with respect to their emergence, organisation, ideology and tactical repertoires: FS is an historic organization with roots in the women’s suffrage movement, whereas SU are a relatively new group that emerged out of the anti-austerity movement; FS is a membership organization with paid staff based in London, conversely SU is a grassroots collective; FS is widely viewed as championing a liberal feminist agenda, whilst SU adopt a more radical and socialist feminist politics; and, finally FS engages with politicians and policy makers, whilst SU undertake direct action protests. The two groups also differ in their approach to and incorporation of intersectionality. Intersectionality came rather late to FS, there are no references to it on their website prior to 2017; however, interviews with FS revealed that a “commitment to intersectionality” is now central to their strategy. Meanwhile, the intersectional commitment of SU is explicit in their ‘Feministo’ which sets out their ideology, campaign priorities and key demands. Despite these differences, comparing the ways in which disabled women and disability-related issues feature within their politics is a useful exercise, not least because they are two high-profile feminist organisations in the UK which receive regular media attention in mainstream as well as social media. The exploration of the two groups’ approaches to intersectionality and disability is considered through analysis of three key areas: their discursive commitments to

intersectionality; the role of intersectionality in their campaigns; and how they practise intersectionality.

### *Discursive commitments to intersectionality*

SU claim that they are “committed to centring disabled women,” such a commitment is unusual for activist groups who don’t have disability as their central focus. On their website, SU highlight interconnected systems of oppression including, “sexism, racism, anti-blackness, classism, disableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, whorephobia, fat-phobia, islamophobia, and antisemitism.” SU use the term ‘disableism’ rather than ‘ableism’, a common elision though the terms are analytically distinct<sup>v</sup>, it is clear that they view the structural oppression of disabled women as a part of their agenda. However, it is worth reflecting on the shortfalls of this type of list-based approach to intersectionality which, whilst demonstrating a discursive commitment, can be difficult to translate into practice; not least when the list is long.

The approach to disability adopted by SU reveals itself to be one that is also mindful of the complexities of cognitive disabilities, an area typically marginalised in discussions surrounding disability. SU adopt a nuanced analysis of disability, one informed by debates within disability rights activism, and by the social model approach, but also grounded in a materialist feminist account of disability. This perhaps suggests that a materialist feminist approach can be considered particularly well-suited for discursive commitments to intersectionality and disability. Indeed, SU’s analytical framework seeks to prioritise disability, by focusing on disabled women as amongst those most affected by austerity, emphasising that government cuts disproportionately affect disabled women.

Conversely, disability does not feature in FS's analytical approach to gender equality. Indeed, when asked, a representative from FS acknowledged that they had not done any work that "specifically/sole focuses on some of the challenges that disabled women face." There are 51 briefings on their website, used to inform and influence political debate concerning women's equality, dating back to 2010: there are no briefings that specifically address disability, nor is disability included in briefings covering analysis of austerity and government budgets, despite cuts to benefits and the introduction of work capability assessments rendering disabled women particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, a search of the FS website for the term 'disability' reveals few references, although there is a blog written by disability rights activist Nicky Clark who argues that the Government needs to do more to meet the needs of unpaid carers (this is accompanied by a gendered photo of feminine hands pushing a man in a wheelchair).<sup>vi</sup>

Exploring whether or not disability is included within an organisation's discursive approach toward women's equality, is an important means by which to gauge the presence of ableism. Research on the two groups reveals that whilst disability is a central element of SU's analysis, it was virtually absent from FS. Given that FS are the largest women's civil society organisation in the UK, the absence of disabled women from their analytical framework is particularly problematic. In order to explore this in greater depth, the chapter now considers the extent to which disability is included within campaigning.

### ***Intersectionality in feminist campaigns***

SU's campaigns revolve around issues connected to violence against women (broadly conceived to include physical, psychological, economic and political forms of violence); analysis reveals that they frequently seek to incorporate disability as a core part of this

agenda. For instance, they marked the International Day of People with Disabilities by drawing attention to the fact that disabled women are more likely to face domestic violence, highlighting the “additional layers of power and control” that perpetrators can wield, and noting that disabled women are not always believed by those from whom they are seeking help. Relatedly, SU have campaigned on specific issues facing disabled women, ranging from perpetrators who withhold medicine to those who refuse to hand over benefits.

SU have also campaigned for the need to improve accessibility in refuges. Disabled women face a dilemma when leaving a home which may have been specially adapted for their needs because many refuges are simply not accessible. SU note that when domestic violence service budgets are cut, this disproportionately affects disabled women and migrant women, who have specific needs not offered in many refuges. As noted in the previous section, SU do not rely upon a ‘stereotypical’ disabled women, and they have drawn attention to the woeful provision of domestic violence refuges for women with cognitive disabilities; just one specialist refuge exists in the country. More broadly, SU have emphasised the interconnectedness between state/police violence, sexual violence and those with mental health needs, in order to campaign for criminal justice reform alongside greater provision of women’s services and improved accessibility for disabled women with multiple disabilities.

FS recently conducted a sex discrimination law review to examine the gaps in sex discrimination legislation, to establish whether equality law is ‘fit for purpose’. The final report, published in January 2018, runs to some 96 pages, covering: Brexit, women in the workplace, violence against women and girls, promoting equality, multiple discrimination and sex equality in Northern Ireland.<sup>vii</sup> In total there are just four references to disability in the report. It is discussed twice in relation to equal pay: first it includes a call for a breakdown

of the gender pay gap reporting by “age, disability, ethnicity, LGBT and part-time status” (p.5) and second to note that disabled women earn on average “6.1% less than non-disabled women.” A section on dress codes notes that they should not be discriminatory “in the case of disability employees have the right to have reasonable adjustments made where it is necessary.” (p.46). Finally, there is a call for the law to account for multiple discrimination (p.83). It is only in relation to employment legislation that disability is considered. There is no recognition of the fact that disabled women are more likely to be victims of abuse, or of the disproportionately high levels of economic inactivity amongst disabled women.

Conversely, FS’s Local Government Commission, exploring aspects related to the political representation of women, did include the experiences of disabled women and included a campaign for job-sharing for Members of Parliament (MPs) which, according to one representative from FS, “had a strong disability focus.” FS believe that in promoting job-sharing for MPs, that this will increase the potential number of disabled women who feel able to run for office; it is certainly true that the current system of political recruitment leaves much room for improvement with regards issues of access. FS’s engagement with issues of disability, tend to revolve around the political representation of disabled women, rather than with any deeper structural analysis of how disability and gender intersect to reproduce inequalities. This is perhaps unsurprising given the liberal nature of Fawcett’s ideology and its focus on institutional politics.

Of course, whilst SU are engaging in grassroots activism and FS are engaged in the production of policy briefs, they are both driven by a desire to campaign for change. Hence, whilst they approach their goals in different manners, the extent to which they include disability in their campaigns is important. Analysis reveals that SU have sought to

incorporate disability into the full range of their campaigns regarding women's equality, whilst FS's inclusion of disability was limited to discussions of employment or political representation. We now turn to the issue of accessibility and the extent to which disabled women are enabled to participate.

### ***Practising intersectionality***

SU differ from FS in a number of ways but perhaps one of the most significant is in their choice of tactical repertoires. Whilst FS work closely with political parties, politicians and prominent journalists, SU employ direct-action tactics, principally through staging high-profile protests and reclaiming spaces. Their tactics have garnered significant media attention; for instance, they recently protested on the red carpet at the 2018 BAFTAs, regarding the lack of support for survivors of domestic violence contained within the proposed Domestic Violence and Abuse Bill, and at the London premier of the film, *Suffragette*.<sup>viii</sup> SU aims to highlight the issues facing some of the most marginalised and vulnerable women in society, explaining that “we use direct action because it demands acknowledgement and answers on a large scale”<sup>ix</sup> and “direct action is disruptive, and we want to disrupt both the cuts to domestic violence services as well as the silence surrounding domestic violence. It forces people to pay attention to you and it gets your message across clearly.”<sup>x</sup>

It would be incorrect to suggest that direct action repertoires exclude disabled people *per se*. Direct action tactics have a long history within the disability rights movement where it has helped reinforce a sense of autonomy, independence and power (Shakespeare 1993). Indeed, disability rights activists traditionally engage in direct-action as a means by which to challenge stereotypical perceptions of capability. However, recognizing the ways in which

physical and mental pain affects some disabled people also means acknowledging that some forms of political protest are difficult if not impossible for them to engage with. SU deals with this tension by adopting a reflexive approach to organising, stating that they will “continually revisit the ways in which we practically implement intersectionality in our organising spaces, our actions and our relationships with each other.”<sup>xi</sup> The group further expand upon this need for active engagement with their organising principles, including a request for Sisters to be “aware of your privileges, including less obvious or invisible hierarchies”, activists are called upon to learn about things they don’t understand and are reminded that if an activist has “acted or spoken harmfully, even if unintentionally,” then this will be discussed with them.

FS do not have a current accessibility policy for their events, nor are there formalised ‘rules’ regarding the organising principles for activists at the national or local level. Their website does, however, contain information regarding their use of technology to provide accessible web content; moreover, it provides further guidance for how to adapt it to suit particular needs. Discussing their approach to accessibility, a representative used the example of D/deaf attendees to illustrate their consultative approach:<sup>xii</sup>

for all three of the cases where I've run events with a D/deaf woman attendee or speaker, they've wanted a palantypist (essentially a live stenographer) rather than a BSL interpreter because the former enables a greater depth of engagement with the detail of what's said and the "feel" of the room, especially where a discussion is happening at speed.



In the case of D/deaf attendees, FS's approach meant that they avoided providing a 'default' approach to specific impairments but actively sought to ensure that individuals were able to actively participate in a manner which best suited them. Rather than adopting a blanket accessibility policy, Fawcett's consultative approach empowers disabled women whilst also recognising that accessibility is about more than wheelchair access. In short, their approach acknowledges that non-disabled people should not presume to understand the needs of disabled people, whilst also avoiding homogenising D/deaf women.

Both SU and FS have tried to include disabled women in their activism, whilst the former have addressed this in their organizing principles, the latter have recognised the heterogeneity amongst disabled women by opting for a consultative approach. SU recognises the challenges of intersectional activism, and in particular the need for activists to reflect upon their own privilege and conscious and unconscious biases. Their willingness to 'learn' about issues, indicates a feminist praxis which fully understands the implications of 'doing' intersectionality; that it requires work on the part of activists and a desire to engage in issues that are new or challenging. Meanwhile, FS have not really engaged with the politics of intersectionality, and in particular issues of disability, to the extent that it influences either their analytic framework or their campaign focus. Indeed, patterns of ableism, especially with regards the absence or erasure of disabled women or their homogenisation, are readily identified within this analysis of FS. Having considered the differing approaches to disability on the part of two high-profile groups, the chapter now turns to the views of disabled women and the extent to which they feel included within the wider women's movement.

## **DISABLED WOMEN'S ACTIVISM**

The mission statement of Sisters of Frida (SoF) includes specific references to intersectional praxis, which in part they demonstrate through “seeking out” disabled women from diverse backgrounds.<sup>xiii</sup> Their commitment to intersectionality is reinforced through their stated values and ethical principles which describes how oppression is mediated via difference. The group also state that they “believe in the self-definition of identity and commit to not policing our identities,” a perspective in keeping with the social model of disability. SoF pay particular attention to three areas: disabled women’s unpaid labour; sexual violence; and domestic abuse. They are active on social media and have also produced a number of important online resources, including a list of academic reports and articles and a statistical factsheet which explores disabled women and employment, health and public life.<sup>xiv</sup> In order to explore the extent to which disabled women felt included by the wider women’s movement, activists within SoF were asked about their experiences, their views are analysed below.

Calls for the women’s movement to look more diverse has resulted in questioning whose voices dominate and whose voices are marginalised (Poster 1995; Marx Ferree and Tripp 2006). However, this has not, for the most part, focused on disabled women.<sup>xv</sup> Indeed, the overwhelming majority of disabled women surveyed did not believe that the UK movement was inclusive of disabled women; only a handful of respondents suggested that it was ‘a little’ or ‘somewhat’ inclusive. A number of explanations for the failure of the movement to be inclusive of disabled women were offered by the respondents, these can be broadly grouped as follows: 1) that the movement is *ignorant* with regards disability; 2) that where disabled women are included this is simply *tokenistic*; and 3) that there is a *failure to engage reflexively* on organizing strategies and accessibility. All of these explanations reflect a perception of the women’s movement as inherently ableist.

## *Ignorance*

Those who are not disabled, nor have significant experience of engaging with disabled people, do not always recognise their own able-bodied/able-minded privilege which can translate into ignorance when it comes to recognising disability, and disabled identity (Kafer 2003; Polombi 2013). Epistemological and ontological privileges thus obscure or erase disability, making it harder for disabled women to engage with, and operate within, spaces which are not specifically created for disabled women. Many of the respondents argued that the movement was neglectful vis-a-vis the inclusion of disabled women. Activists observed that despite a rhetorical commitment to inclusivity, groups often ignored or overlooked disabled women. One woman noted “Intersectional feminists often neglect to include disability in their rhetoric,” whilst another observed that “the movement just doesn’t care about disabled women.” Respondents highlighted the “thoughtlessness” of the women’s movement, reflecting on the irony of “so-called intersectional feminists” who failed to consider disability or disabled women.

One activist reported that non-disabled feminists repeatedly use “offensive language about disability,” whilst another identified that some in the wider movement used “non-social model language which is preferred in the UK by most disabled activists.” Several respondents felt that the movement did not value the “experiences” or “lived realities” of disabled women, and that until it did so disabled women would continue to be “marginalised” and “excluded.” This impression of a movement ignorant of disability is strongly associated with a pervasive ableist culture, one that assumes able body/able-mindedness as the default subjectivity.

Explaining why they felt that the wider movement failed to include disabled women, many respondents reported that there was a lack of understanding or awareness regarding disability, as one activist stated, “we don’t enter into their thoughts at all because they simply don’t understand our lives.” Whilst for some, this lack of awareness was a result of a more deliberate sense of neglect, others felt that it was due to a broader lack of visibility regarding issues that affect disabled people, “feminists groups, like the rest of society, don’t talk about disability because they don’t hear much about it in the media [...] it just doesn’t register with them because they’re never exposed to the issues.” Activists decried the failure to offer a platform to disabled women; one respondent noting that there was an “urgent need to read disabled women, listen to disabled women, meet with disabled women, hire disabled women.” Without disabled women “at the table” feminist groups would not be able to move forward in this area, nor would they be able to defend their self-described intersectional activism. These responses illustrate how ableist logic absents or erases disability, in other words privilege can ignore what it does not want to see. The responses of the activists cited above chimes with the experiences of other marginalised groups within the women’s movement, in particular the desire for autonomous organising in response to ongoing patterns of privilege (Thomlinson 2012).

### ***Tokenism***

Attempts to engage in intersectional praxis can sometimes run the risk of appearing tokenistic, especially when a marginalised group, or an issue that particularly affects a marginalised group, is added as an afterthought to pre-existing campaigns or agendas (Gökarıksel and Smith 2017). For disabled women, who can sometimes be highly visible, their presence at an event is used to symbolise or demonstrate that the organisers or event is intersectional. The decision to invite a visibly disabled woman to participate in an event,

recalls Audre Lorde's frustration with the way in which white women activists issued her with a last-minute invitation to speak at event in order that they might be considered inclusive or diverse (1984).

Some activists noted that the inclusion of disabled women tended to be tokenistic, and as a consequence there was only a superficial engagement with the issues and with disabled women. One activist argued, "they [feminist groups] would like to be able to say they are inclusive of disabled women...but we never see their support. They invite us - but it can be tokenistic," whilst another respondent stated that the movement "tries occasionally but it often feels tokenistic." Others felt as though disability was included as part of a "checklist" approach to intersectionality and there was a strong feeling that the movement did little beyond adopt a rhetorical approach to inclusivity. One respondent explained how disability was only included by groups "as a way in which to prove they were diverse" or to "secure funding by including disability."

For some, the tokenistic approach was connected to a sense of instrumentalism amongst the wider movement that ensured disability was mentioned and included but not centred, and certainly not understood. Tokenism is incompatible with an intersectional politics that includes a rigorous analysis of ableism; in fact, it suggests a superficial approach to intersectionality. An approach that does not (and indeed cannot) provide sufficient analysis of the structural intersections that perpetuate the marginalisation and exclusion of disability and disabled women.

### *Accessibility*

Issues of accessibility have been foundational to intersectional analysis; Crenshaw's original exploration of the marginalisation of women of colour explicitly included analysis of the ways in which migrant women were denied access to domestic violence refuges in New York (1981). The focus on accessibility is not, however, always explicitly addressed either in scholarly work or by social movement actors, yet it is a basic pre-requisite for enabling some disabled women to actually participate in the movement. Accessibility is of course itself varied and covers a range of issues from buildings, transportation to the formatting of accessible materials.

The lack of any meaningful attempts to organise in an accessible way was considered to be a serious issue, as one respondent noted, "well, you know they make a big deal about the venues being accessible, although usually only for a wheelchair as if that's the only type of disability, so then they feel like they'd better have someone in a wheelchair to show how thoughtful they've been." Another respondent argued that feminist groups "don't prioritize accessibility" whilst another noted that inclusion depended on the type of activity, "in online spaces we're seeing an upswing in sharing our message, but in practical ways not at all. Demos are often inaccessible, and in the drive for intersectionality we're usually the last group thought of - if we're thought of at all." If meetings, debates, demos, assemblies and other forms of activism aren't accessible, any subsequent discussion of disability is rendered inherently problematic because disabled activists can't participate.

Taking the issues of ignorance, tokenism and accessibility together, a picture is revealed of a movement which assumes that participants are non-disabled. Such an assumption not only reflects a widespread perception of an ableist culture within the movement but also a set of privileges related to able-bodied/able-mindedness.

## **IMPROVING INTERSECTIONAL PRAXIS**

Of course, disabled women are not the only group to have experienced marginalisation within the women's movement (Zack, 2005). Indeed, whilst there are barriers to participation and inclusion that are specific to disability and particular types of impairment, the frustration on the part of disabled activists resonates with those criticisms levelled by other groups including, women of colour (hooks 1981, Bassel and Emejulu 2014), migrant women (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983) and transwomen (Serano 2007). Similarly, the idea that the women's movement is engaged in a superficial approach to intersectionality, expressed by the disabled activists, speaks to wider concerns regarding its usage (Carastathis 2014). However, moving beyond the politics of exclusion and marginalisation, which come about as a result of the privilege embodied by those whose voices have tended to dominate the movement, it is clear that disabled women have a specific set of concerns regarding the ability of the wider movement to be truly intersectional. When asked for their views on how the wider movement could improve, the responses largely coalesced around 3 key changes: 1) practical steps to inclusion; 2) improving the representation of disabled women; and 3) developing a greater sense of the issues and discourse surrounding disability.

### ***1) Practical steps to inclusion***

Improving accessibility was cited as a critical area for improvement, and one that needed to go beyond simply ensuring wheelchair access. One respondent noted that at a large event it had to be pointed out to the organisers that the venue was inaccessible, "they just hadn't thought about it." Several respondents argued that there needed to be a more nuanced approach to accessibility, as one activist noted, "being more aware of invisible barriers to participation. Staging a conference networking meeting in a bar, for instance, is often bad for people suffering from vestibular disorders, migraines, and neurological issues with sensory

overload,” whilst another observed that resources should be available to help “fund Personal Assistants or travel.” Respondents repeatedly stressed the importance of engaging with disabled women to help ensure accessible events, hence “centering the experiences of disabled women and their accessibility needs is the only way to ensure full inclusion.” The responses of the activists emphasized the need for organisers to be proactive with regards inclusion strategies not only by thinking carefully about venues but also by educating themselves about disability.

## ***2) Representing disabled women***

Activists were also concerned that disabled women simply weren't invited to events or given a platform to speak. For one disabled woman this was especially ironic given that “feminists have fought for so long for women to be included, by challenging all-male line ups and now they themselves fail to provide a platform for disabled women.” The lack of visibility for disabled women within the movement, and in the media, was seen to be a real issue and further entrenched a sense of marginalisation and exclusion. There was a recognition that not all disabled people actually identify as disabled, and that there were some who are unwilling to “talk openly about their disability,” hence, providing a platform for activists who are engaged in disability rights activism is a critical way in which to increase and improve the visibility of disabled women. The absence of high profile disabled women amongst the feminists who frequently appeared in the media was noted, as one activist suggested “they should give up some of their privilege and opportunity in order to promote disabled women's voices.”

## ***3) Knowledge***



Increasing the presence of disabled women was seen as a key step towards ensuring that the movement addressed disability related issues and interests, in part because “non-disabled women can’t understand or even comprehend the various things we have to negotiate so we have to be present to tell them about it.” Similarly, there was a strong belief that non-disabled activists needed to hear from disabled women in order to develop their own knowledge of disability. Several respondents observed that some people find it “difficult” or “challenging” to discuss disability, and so including disabled women would help bring disability into mainstream feminist discourse. One activist noted that there was a reluctance to talk about disability because of a fear of saying the wrong thing, “I think that there is a fear of disability, not only in terms of what it might mean at an individual level, but also for some feminists there is a worry about using the wrong language; the only way to resolve this is to make sure that disabled women are present.” Others noted that feminists should seek to educate themselves about disability as part of their commitment to social justice, because disabled women should not have to serve as “educators” to the wider movement. Finally, some respondents observed that despite disability being in the news more regularly, particularly with regards to cuts to welfare provision that women’s groups were “absent” from the debate and “seemingly have nothing to say about the devastating cuts effecting women’s lives.”

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Challenging ableism is not only a normative good, and in the interests of all of those interested in equality and social justice, but, as Jenny Morris identified more than twenty years ago, would result in a more radical form of feminist politics. This research has explored the inclusion of disabled women and disability-related issues, analysed how and why disability remains marginalised, and sought to argue that challenging ableism within the

women's movement is an important task. Of course, this research only tells part of the story with regards to the intersection between gender and disability, and future research should explore how, when and where gender features within disability rights activism.

The analysis presented here reveals a complicated picture with regards ableism in the UK women's movement. It would be fair to argue that disability is largely absent from Fawcett's approach to gender inequality, although they have adopted a consultative approach to organising events; meanwhile, Sisters Uncut have included disability within their campaigning and through their calls for a pedagogy of intersectionality. However, disabled women are very clear that there is pervasive ableism within the women's movement. Despite the fact that disability rights activism is relatively high profile, this has not proven to be a sufficiently favourable context within which ableist logic is challenged within parts of the women's movement. If we understand intersectionality to be concerned with addressing multiple intersecting points of oppression, then challenging able-bodied and able-minded privilege is a critical and urgent task.

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<sup>i</sup> I use the term women's movement rather than feminist movement in recognition of the fact that Sisters of Frida, a disabled women's collective, does not define itself specifically as a feminist organisation.

<sup>ii</sup> In line with UK feminist disability scholarship, this chapter uses the term disabled women/disabled feminists rather than women with disabilities; this foregrounds the disabling role that society plays (Morris 2001) and is also more reflective of the discourse used by disabled feminists in the UK.

<sup>iii</sup> For instance, many feminists argue for the removal of the informal burden of care undertaken by women, whilst disability rights activists reject approaches that could see disabled people institutionalised instead of enabling their freedom (Erevelles 1996: 552)

<sup>iv</sup> Debates around selective abortion can raise divisions between disabled women and feminist pro-choice activists, where the former have expressed concerns about eugenics and the attempt to erase disabled people through genetic screening for foetal impairment (Kallianes and Rubenfeld 1997).

<sup>v</sup> Whilst ableism refers to the cultural norms which promote the idealisation of able-bodied/able-mindedness, disablism refers to the practice of explicitly excluding or marginalising people based upon their impairments (see Campbell 2009)

<sup>vi</sup> For further details see <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Blog/time-new-deal-care-carers> date accessed 2nd March 2018

<sup>vii</sup> For the full report see <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/sex-discrimination-law-review-final-report> date accessed 2nd March 2018

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<sup>viii</sup> Mumford, Gwilym. 18.2.2018. ‘Domestic Violence Activists Sisters Uncut Invade Baftas Red Carpet’ *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/18/sisters-uncut-baftas-red-carpet-protest-theresa-may> date accessed 24th April 2019.

<sup>ix</sup> Sisters Uncut. Comment. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/comment/theresa-may-acknowledges-demands-will-continue-use-direct-disruptive-action/> date accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2018

<sup>x</sup> For full details of the interview see <https://www.thefword.org.uk/2016/01/sisters-uncut/> date accessed 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018 <https://www.thefword.org.uk/2016/01/sisters-uncut/> date accessed 27<sup>th</sup> March 2018

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xii</sup> D/deaf refers to those who are Deaf (sign language users) and those who are deaf (hard of hearing people with English as their first language and may lip-read and/or use hearing aids).

<sup>xiii</sup> Their Mission Statement and Values are Principles are available on their website <http://www.sisofrida.org/about/sisters-of-frida-vision-and-values/> [date accessed 30<sup>th</sup> January 2018]

<sup>xiv</sup> Factsheets are available online <http://www.sisofrida.org/resources/disabled-women-facts-and-stats-2/> [date accessed 5<sup>th</sup> February 2018]

<sup>xv</sup> For example, a 6<sup>th</sup> February 2018 Channel 4 News Report covering the 100 year anniversary since (some) women got the vote spent much of the discussion analysing how the movement could and should be more diverse <https://www.channel4.com/news/joan-bakewell-on-feminism-the-ball-is-rolling-and-it-is-not-going-to-stop> date accessed 27th March 2018.