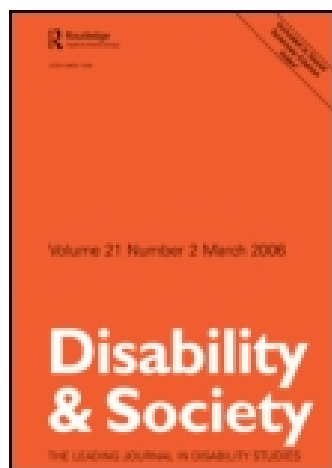


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Disabled women and transnational feminisms: shifting boundaries and frontiers

Míriam Arenas Conejo ^a

^a Department of Sociological Theory, Philosophy of Law and Methodologies in the Social Sciences, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

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Disabled women and transnational feminisms: shifting boundaries and frontiers

Miriam Arenas Conejo*

Department of Sociological Theory, Philosophy of Law and Methodologies in the Social Sciences, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

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From the standpoint of a non-disabled feminist, the paper explores the transnational activism of disabled women. Under the light of shifting boundaries between women and frontiers among cultures and nations, the possible tensions between disability rights and feminist movements are also considered. Thus, disabled women's concerns are reviewed in the discourse of their organizations and in their achievements within the United Nations. As a result, a defensive strategy for the protection of disabled women's human rights is identified as intertwined with a proactive engagement in radical democracy practices. This strategy is considered as furthering coalitions with other oppressed groups, and therefore as an outstanding example of the potentialities of transnational human rights discourse in alliance-building.

Keywords: disabled women; feminism; transnational activism; human rights

Points of interest

- Many disabled women are interested in the feminist movement, but often they feel it does not pay attention to their worries or needs.
- Human rights are now a powerful tool for the struggles of women's rights all around the world, and also for disabled women.
- The United Nations protects the human rights of disabled women. This is why disabled women commonly mention this fact in their organizations.
- Disabled women want a world without violence and abuse – and where everybody has the right to decide everything by himself/herself, and to have equal opportunities in any aspect of life.
- Many disabled women are keen on joining any other groups of women (and people in general), who work together for those changes in the world.

Introduction

Since the Fourth Women's World Conference in Beijing in 1995, transnational practices have been considered the worldwide dominant modality of feminist

*Email: miriam.arenas.bcn@gmail.com

movements (Desai 2005). They are understood as both organizing across national borders, and as framing local, national, regional, and global activism in ‘transnational’ discourses (Desai 2005, 319). A feminist collective identity has accompanied those practices, the strength and vitality of which derive from its diversity and adaptability to different cultures and moments (Castells 1998). Nevertheless, such a global identity still has many boundaries for some women, such as those with disabilities, whose concerns are often relegated ‘to the margins’.

As a ‘non-disabled’ woman with interest in fostering more inclusive feminist theories and practices, I review the contributions made to these areas through the activism of disabled women. Thus, this article explores the issue of shifting boundaries and frontiers in a double dimension: it considers how disabled women are attempting to find inclusion within the women’s movement and are doing so at a transnational level. It starts with a brief outline of the splits and synergies between the feminist and the disability rights’ movement, as approached by disability theory and activism. Then, in a more extended section the activism of disabled women is explored through a double approach. Initially, a short overview is given of the achievements of their activism within the United Nations. This is followed by the results of research based on discourse presented on the websites of disabled women’s organizations. Defensive and proactive dimensions of this discourse are then distinguished. Finally, some future challenges of this transnational activism based on human rights’ discourse are indicated as reflections for concluding the article.

Shifting boundaries: smashing glass walls

The discriminatory and invisible barriers that women face when they try to reach higher social and power positions are referred as the ‘glass ceiling’. Drawing on that metaphor, disabled women refer to the ‘glass walls’ they also find when trying to get closer to ‘non-disabled’ feminists (Arnau 2006, 138–139). Disability theory has dealt with this ambivalence between feminist and disability movements. Some widely agreed parallelisms are, for instance: making the personal into the political, reshaping the attitudes held about each group – women and disabled people (Nixon 2009) – or pursuing the end of discrimination based on biological instances (Sheldon 1999, 644).

The effects of ‘broad-brush categorization processes’ (Fawcett 2000, 5–6) and the possible colonization of the discourse by majority factions (Nixon 2009, 84) have been also tackled in both movements. Disabled women denounced the fact that while feminism was addressing issues of their concern as women, their experience of disability was not accounted for. Moreover, some non-disabled feminists have also been ‘advocating ideas that are problematic for disabled people and counter to the principles of the disability movement’ (McLaughlin 2003, 297) in issues such as reproductive freedom or care in the community (Sheldon 1999, 651; Morris 1991, 1997). Therefore, even when feminism has included the idea of diversity among women, disabled women still feel that their voices are marginalized (Sheldon 1999, 645).

Likewise, the disability rights’ movement has been criticized for marginalizing women’s demands and claims (Morris 1997, 22–26), since ‘disabled people and their organizations are no more exempt from racism, sexism and heterosexism than non-disabled people and their organizations’ (Morris 1991, 178). Nevertheless, it would remain an ‘underlying assumption’ that those other oppressive experiences will be

confronted by other social movements (Vernon 1998, 209). This simultaneous oppression approach has been ambiguously accepted. While being a possible strategy for improving the alliances with other oppressed groups, it also runs the risk of increasing fragmentation within the disability rights' movement (Sheldon 1999).

Shifting frontiers: transnational activism

Despite all the difficulties described above, in the past 20 years disabled women have gained a space of participation in transnational activism linked to women's human rights struggles. This section is intended to offer a snapshot of that reality based on some data analysis. After a short description of the achievements within agencies of the United Nations, the results of an Internet-based research on worldwide organizations run by disabled women are presented.

The United Nations umbrella, seeking spaces for recognition

The Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, with its breakdown of barriers between women from the Global North and the South, could be said to mark the transnational process of disabled women seeking spaces for recognition. The contentions present at the events previously promoted by the International Decade for Women of the United Nations turned into a 'solidarity of difference' approach (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999; Desai 2005). The United Nations officially recognized that some groups of women are more vulnerable and deserving of special attention, including 'women with physical and mental disabilities'. The Women's Committee of the Disabled Peoples' International was created by some of the members who attended that Conference. In 1990 they became co-organizers of the Seminar of Disabled Women in Vienna, which was launched as a preparatory meeting for the Commission on the Status of Women in 1991. The recommendations from that Seminar, together with The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities of 1994, became the reference tools at that moment (Sarà-Serrano 1997).

However, it was at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 that, despite the differences among the diverse group of women, a new common language emerged and the idea of 'women's rights are human rights' became paradigmatic. Only women from the major international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors were involved in the official conference. Nevertheless, grass-roots women were present as well, although most participated in their own Forum on Women (Desai 2005, 322), which brought together about 30,000 NGO representatives (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999, 24). The day before the Forum, the First International Symposium of Women with Disabilities took place in Beijing, being attended by over 200 disabled women and their allies from 25 countries (Chadwick and Levine 1996a, 2–3). The aim was to encourage disabled women to participate in the decisions affecting their collective and how they should be addressed at the NGO Forum and the UN Conference (Chadwick and Levine 1996a, 3). Afterwards, it was estimated that another 200 disabled women also attended the NGO Forum. During those days, the diversity of their issues and concerns emerged as strongly linked to the culture and economic conditions of the different regions. Even so, strong commonalities also appeared, in that in almost all societies marginalized disabled women (Chadwick and Levine 1996a, 4). Although many of their claims were finally included in the Platform for Action (Sarà-Serrano 1997), they had to

face some disabling barriers. In spite of the efforts during the previous months to ensure that the site and workshops would be accessible to women with all types of disabilities, physical and communication access was a major problem, as reported by some of the attendants (Chadwick and Levine 1996b):

In the morning there was something about Latin America. I was very interested in being there. It was on the fourth floor. Some people arrived and they would carry me. That is very dangerous. (Wheelchair user, quoted in Chadwick and Levine 1996b)

I'm a Deaf person. People stand up and speak, and there is no translation for us. We're Deaf people and we need to talk to the others. (Quoted in Chadwick and Levine 1996b)

Conference materials were not provided in alternate formats such as Braille, tape, and large print for women who are blind, low-vision, or dyslexic. The disability tent was placed in a remote location of the site was difficult to reach because of mud and rocks. Disabled women held demonstrations to protest the lack of access. It was the first time at the conference that a group held a protest outside of the designated demonstration area. (Quoted in Chadwick and Levine 1996b)

The Platform for Action became a cornerstone for the worldwide feminist movement. Unfortunately, in its recent 15-year evaluation the International Network of Women with Disabilities stated that: 'very few, if any, efforts have been taken by Governments to ensure that women and girls with disabilities can fully enjoy their fundamental human rights on an equal basis with others' (International Network of Women with Disabilities [INWWD] 2010, 2).

Finally, it is important to mention that disabled women have also aligned their efforts with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Their contribution to the drafting ensured a twin-track approach in addressing the interests of disabled women (Kinoti 2006). As a result, the Convention is designed with a mainstreaming gender approach and, despite some gaps, it includes:

a stand alone substantive article that recognizes that women face aggravated discrimination due to their gender, disability and other identities, and compels states to take all measures necessary to ensure they enjoy their human rights in full. (Kinoti 2006)

Connecting the global and the local: mapping the terrain of organizations by disabled women

Most of those transnational achievements for disabled women are connected to a set of organizations run by women with disabilities. While many contextual differences can be identified, they share a common language. The results of research carried out in 2008 are presented here, focusing only on those parallelisms in their discourse. The study was based on a selection of organizations that best fitted into the category of the 'populist/activist' model defined by Oliver as:

Politically active groups, often antagonistic to partnership approach, whose primary activities are focused on personal or political 'empowerment', and that undertake collective action and consciousness-raising. (Quoted in Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999, 157)

Searching on websites of networks and platforms of this kind of activism, a first round of focusing selected those that specifically mentioned women and which provided

details about their member organizations.¹ Secondly, only those including the word 'women' in their names were chosen. That preliminary list of organizations was completed by and/or contrasted with information from other websites² that listed organizations engaged in public actions oriented towards disabled women. This process resulted in an initial record of 83 associations from all over the world, which would later be reduced to 52 by checking which of them had active websites, and to 15 by selecting only those explicitly created and/or managed by disabled women.

For the analysis, only the discourse portrayed on the website was taken into account, considering: 'contributing words, classifications or explanations that account for the issues involved in a situation' as 'an exercise of epistemic transcendence that is not reducible to a mere ideology or activist rhetoric' (Godàs 2007, 175). In addition, it was assumed that 'the Internet has resulted in a significant shift in communication capacity and potential for political organizing' (Carty 2010). Some core restrictions of this data collection process must also be mentioned:

The scope of information on the Internet, its rapid rates of growth and change, and its chaotic organization obfuscates the population of messages under study and what constitutes a representative sample of those messages, thereby threatening the external validity of Web-based research. (Weare and Lin 2000, 289)

Thus, it is possible that not all of the existing disabled women's organizations have an active website, while having one is not a guarantee of updated and reliable information. Therefore, the results presented here are not intended to be representative of that reality but rather to offer an initial approach agreeing that 'the Internet has opened completely new avenues for research by making available data [...] largely ignored by the research community' (Weare and Lin 2000, 275). The final selection of only 15 cases might seem quantitatively irrelevant; nevertheless, those organizations belong to 14 distinct countries from Europe, North America, Asia, Oceania, reinforcing the transnational assumptions.

The analysis of the website's texts was carried out following only two general categories: the defensive and the proactive dimensions of the discourse. The demands associated with the fulfilment of acknowledged formal equality (Beckett 2006, 182) are considered part of a defensive strategy. In contrast, a proactive logic would imply the claim for 'new rights' (Beckett 2006, 181) associated with a 'normative project'. In other words, 'an intention of generating and implanting alternative norms in response to the existing ones, values on how things should be and/or knowledge to justify plausibility or necessity of that "should be"' (Godàs 2007, 70). Even though it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the defensive and the proactive dimensions of the discourse, they are presented here separately. Topics were selected according to their recurrence on the texts and their relevance within the UN framework. Results are not presented as a detailed analysis of discourse, but rather as a portrait of the general lines of their claims. This is why only some quotations³ from the websites are included, together with concepts from UN documents and some literature references. Table 1 summarizes the name of selected organizations, their URLs, and their country of location.

The defensive strategy: human rights

Human rights discourse, more or less explicitly, is the background of most of the organizations examined. One of the main outstanding cases is Women with

Disabilities Australia, not only self-defined as a national organization of disabled people and women, but also as a national human rights organization. The Forum Women and Disability in Sweden mentions attaining full access to human rights for women and girls with disabilities as one of its goals. And the Catalan Associació de Dones No Estàndard (Non-Standard Women's Association) seek 'to eliminate conventions that prevent all people from living with respect for human rights'.

The 'defensive strategy' is articulated within this human rights framework, with three prominent claims: eradicating violence and sexual abuse, advocating moral autonomy, and eliminating disabling barriers.

Eradication of violence and sexual abuse

In connection with the transnational women's movement, this is one of the most commonly recurring issues on the websites explored. For instance, the UK Disability Forum for European Affairs (UKDFfEA) Women's Committee cites the fact that 'women with disabilities suffer the highest levels of violence and abuse while they barely have safe spaces' as the reason for its creation. In that sense, the Austrian association Ninlil is also specifically created to fight sexual violence against women with learning difficulties. Women with Disabilities Australia has even received several international awards and recognitions for their work in this area.

The relevance of this issue has been acknowledged since the Vienna Seminar. Initially, Beijing's Platform for Action included the claim of guaranteeing that disabled people have access to information and services about violence, and a call to all social agents to take specific measures and create holistic programmes to

Table 1. List of selected organizations.

Country	Name of the organization	Website
Australia	Women with Disabilities Australia	www.wwda.org.au/index.htm
Austria	Ninlil	www.ninlil.at
Belgium	Persephone VZW	www.persephonevzw.org
Canada	DAWN – Canada Disabled Women's Network	www.dawncanada.net
Denmark	Danish Women with Disabilities	www.kvindermedhandicap.dk/Summary%20english.html
France	Femmes pour le dire, Femmes pour l'Agir	http://www.femmespourledire.asso.fr/
	Réponses Initiatives Femmes Handicapées	www.rifh.org
Georgia	Georgian Disabled Women's International Association	http://www.itic.org.ge/gdwia/GDWIA.htm
Germany	Association Weibernetz e.V.	www.weibernetz.de/index.html
South Korea	Korean Differently Abled Women's United	www.kdawu.org
Spain	Associació de Dones No Estàndards	www.donesnoestandards.cat
Sri Lanka	Association of Women with Disabilities	www.akasa.lk
Sweden	Forum Women and Disability in Sweden	http://www.kvinnor-funktionshinder.se/web/page.aspx?pageid=55820
Switzerland	Avanti Donne	www.avantidonne.ch
United Kingdom	Chair Women's Committee UK	www.edfwomen.org.uk/news.htm
	Disability forum European Affairs	

respond to all forms of violence against girls and women (Sarà-Serrano 1997). At this moment, the UN Convention also recognizes in item 'q' of its preamble that: 'women and girls with disabilities are often at greater risk, both within and outside the home, of violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation' (United Nations 2006).

The right to moral autonomy

The right to autonomy has been a claim of both feminist and disability movements, although with different nuances. The idea of 'moral autonomy', for example, is at the very core of the Independent Living Movement. Its followers stress the ability that every human being has to express himself or herself as a unique and unrepeatable individual, and thus as valid as any other. Accordingly, nobody should be denied the right to be a moral subject, regardless of their characteristics, and any person should be treated as such, in his/her physical, psychological, and social dimensions (GIAT 2006, 81). Likewise, the ideals of autonomy and agency have been at the heart of several struggles for women's full citizenship (Lister 2003, 107), evolving later toward the demand for the right to autonomy respectful of the human needs of interdependence and reciprocity (Lister 2003, 114). The Vienna Seminar Report (United Nations 1990) recommends the development of specific legislation about sexual and reproductive rights. It would include particular training for women, their family and health personnel to prevent related medical decisions without the informed consent of disabled women.

Several examples of this topic can be drawn from the website analysis, whether from a feminist or a disability rights' background. The German organization Weibernetz, for instance, describes disabled women as 'experts on their own matters'. The French association Réponses Initiatives Femmes Handicapées demands the freedom of choice in any aspect of the life and social trajectory, claiming the 'property over their bodies, their minds and their assets' and looking for the emancipation. In other terms, the UKDFfEA mentions the right to freedom of choice for every woman regarding issues of pregnancy or abortion, meaning access to 'informed decision-making choices' instead of advice.

Knocking down disabling barriers

The social model of disability analyses disablism – the discrimination against disabled people – with the aim of eradicating it (Barnes 1998; Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999). Consequently, and in opposition to the personal approach of the medical model, it analyses the physical, social and economic barriers faced by disabled people in many of the dimensions of their life (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare 1999). Many of such structural inequalities are also an issue of concern of the transnational feminist movement:

The emphasis on the discursive without enough attention to the structural and material resources and power is one of the primary reasons for women's continuing inequalities around the world despite 30 years of UN commitments to women's equality. (Desai 2005, 319)

These aspects were also found on the websites analysed. Canada Disabled Women's Network, for instance, has as one of their goals the struggle against poverty and for

equality in employment, health and access to services. The Association of Women with Disabilities from Sri Lanka primarily works for the prevention of discrimination at social economic, educational and cultural levels. Finally, the Swiss organization *Avanti Donne* emphasizes the equality in the labour and professional domain.

These demands are also very common in the UN agreements. They urge members to reduce the high illiteracy rates among disabled women (United Nations 2005) by increasing their education through inclusive models (United Nations 1990) and removing the barriers that prevent their access (Sarà-Serrano 1997). Labour issues are mentioned as well, demanding strategies in professional training actions to guarantee access to qualifications and well-paid jobs (United Nations 1990). In order that disabled women can gain economic self-sufficiency (Sarà-Serrano 1997) they also exhort members to remove 'any legislation and practices, which discourage or prevent women with disabilities from participating in the labour force' (United Nations 1990). The need for financial support is also addressed 'to compensate for disability-related services, such as personal assistance services, transportation, housing, technical aids and health care' (United Nations 1990). In any case, all these measures should guarantee the 'right to moral autonomy' as exposed above (United Nations 1990). Therefore, any economic support should be enough 'to live with dignity, whether single or married', any social benefits 'should be directly given to them and not to their family', and the right and possibility to choose their attendant should be respected (United Nations 1990).

The proactive strategy: far beyond gender and disability

Intertwined with the defensive strategy outlined above, a proactive strategy is also guiding the discourse. More flexible concepts of femininity and disability related to practices of radical democracy are the main lines.

Universal capabilities, diverse women

The Vienna Seminar defined a common front formed from an array of highly diverse women and girls who were experiencing the same discriminatory situation. This aimed to replace their externally imposed and divisive classification based on medical criteria by a solidarity network. Together they constructed a new shared self-identity as a group of oppressed women, by including:

Girls and women [...] with physical, sensory and mental impairments, whether visually apparent or not (including such conditions as diabetes, heart disease or breast cancer). [...] of all ages, in rural and urban areas, regardless of the severity of the disability or whether they live in the community or in an institution. (United Nations 1990)

This strategy has the potential of strengthening the 'glass walls' mentioned above, reinforcing the idea of something 'fundamentally different about disabled people' (Beckett 2006, 198). However, it is impossible to establish with precision the always blurred boundaries separating ability from disability, the two concepts being, in fact, the extremes of a 'continuum' (Riu 2005). All human beings are, by and large, disabled: mortal, short-lived, with weak legs, with serious back and neck problems, faulty memory, and so forth (Nussbaum 2006). Furthermore 'we are all vulnerable to experiencing impairment and disability at some point during our

life-time' (Beckett 2006, 198). Shifting to this approach could help disabled people in 'joining with other groups from different subject positions in a shared struggle against disempowering practices' (Beckett 2006, 198). At the same time, these proposals can be connected with the feminist discourses that try to widen the concept of 'womanhood'. Maintaining its emancipatory potential, the goal is to generate solidarity links, with the assumption that any woman can act consciously in her life as well as in the social world (Puigvert 2001).

On the websites examined, references of both trends were found, often inter-related. Some explicitly mention all the collectives they intend to include. Such as: people with and without disabilities, focusing on women with learning difficulties (Ninlil); those with chronic diseases and disorders (Persephone); oppressed women: black, young, lesbian, elder, workers, mothers, daughters, sisters (UKDFfEA); with no discrimination according to disability, age or sexual orientation, political ideas or religion (Weibernetz); Indian, black, Asian, coloured, immigrant, lesbian, elder women, women living in institutions and single mothers (Canada Disabled Women's Network); and so forth.

Stepping towards democratic radicalization

The idea of flexible identities, when is framed under the objective of political equality, is usually connected to approaches of 'democratic radicalization'. It is defined by Sandilands (1993) as 'a form of politics that recognizes diversity and invites participation from a variety of social spaces', encouraging, in turn, 'the continual proliferation of new voices, new communities, and new identities'. By defining 'some common terrain in which this diversity can converse, and from which this diversity can be fostered', it constitutes citizens 'as members of a democracy in addition to being members of specific groups' (Sandilands 1993). In some instances, it can also imply a 'broader participation in public decision-making', where under a deliberative process 'citizens address public problems by reasoning together about how best to solve them' (Cohen and Fung 2004, 23–24).

References to those dynamics of radical democracy were also found on the websites examined, often conceived in terms of active citizenship. Therefore, the French organization Femmes pour le dire, Femmes pour l'Agir puts forth a strategy of 'screaming loud and strong that we are women and citizens rather than disabled'. Korean Differently Abled Women's United defines its main goal as 'making it possible for women with disabilities to become full citizens who actively participate in society'. Similarly, Sri Lanka's Association of Women with Disabilities claims that they want to be able to 'live as independent and autonomous citizens'. The Georgian Disabled Women's International Association is self-defined as a 'civic public union that unites women with active life position'. References to feminism are also present in some cases, as in the Forum Women and Disability in Sweden considered 'a democratic and feminist women's organization, which is politically and religiously independent'. Danish Women with Disabilities sustain their will to 'contribute to a democratic and peaceful world where everybody has the same value regardless of colour, disability or gender'.

Consolidating transnational activism

These local organizations also have their own transnational space on the Internet. In 2008 the participants of a global Summit on the Rights of Women with Disabilities

held in Quebec decided to launch The International Network of Women with Disabilities, aiming to share:

our knowledge and experiences, speak up for our rights, empower ourselves to bring about positive change and inclusion in our communities and to promote our involvement in relevant politics at all levels, towards creating a more just and fair world that acknowledges disability and gender, justice, and human rights. (INWWD 2008)

So, the defensive and proactive dimensions analysed above also appear here as relevant. On the one hand, this group's aims include 'accessing education, labour market and health care as well as overcoming isolation, poverty, forced sterilization and violence, among many other dehumanizing living conditions'. And on the other hand, it also tries to overcome disability-related and cultural boundaries for fostering alliances, within deliberative and democratic dynamics. Currently, the INWWD 'comprises about 200 women from international, regional, national or local organizations, groups or networks of women with disabilities, as well as individual women with disabilities and their allies' (INWWD 2010). The network has become a virtual meeting point where women participating can freely exchange their ideas, as I have myself experienced since I became involved.

This kind of transnational activism runs the risk of reproducing some existing structural inequalities since it can exclude women lacking formal education – and facility in English, in particular (Desai 2007, 801) – or information and communications technologies (ICT) skills. Nevertheless, virtual communities are also considered promising spaces in the reconstruction of the public sphere:

New forms of organizational flexibility and efficiency among online groups provided by ICTs increases their ability to influence policy processes by subverting the 'professional' campaign model and giving rise to a new type of civic engagement at the grassroots level. ICT-based virtual communities, like actors in many contemporary movements, are therefore, made up of social relations that are decentralized, diverse, heterogeneous, fluid, open, informal, and in many ways self-governing. (Carty 2010, 159).

Concluding remarks: future challenges

This paper has aimed to give an introductory depiction of the activism of disabled women, stressing the potential, and actual, synergies with the feminist movement in a transnational approach. Grounding itself on the parallelisms of both movements as well as the tensions between them, the aim has been to re-explore them at the light of the contemporary women's human rights. Some of the achievements of disabled women within the United Nations framework, as well as an approach to their organizations and networks, have been the basis to argue that in disabled women's discourses there is a defensive strategy pursuing the enforcement of their human rights. This strategy appears as focused on three general goals: the eradication of violence and sexual abuse perpetrated against disabled women and girls, the respect of the moral autonomy of every disabled person, and the removal of any disabling barrier in society. International agreements on human rights combined with the emerging infrastructure of global citizenship are increasingly becoming a key political tool for those collectives excluded from citizen rights (Lister 2003, 43). Women in general, but also disabled men and women, are one of those groups most interested in that struggle for recognition of their full citizenship (Lister 2003, 5–6). Indeed, human rights also appear as a promising tool for breaking the 'glass walls'

that traditionally would have kept disabled women apart from mainstream feminism. With the focus on a shared humanity to be protected, traditional broad-brush categories can be avoided, allowing new alliances to be built. Therefore, disabled women, by providing with their discourses new meanings for the fact of being a 'woman' and a 'person with disabilities', are engaging in a proactive dimension that goes further their specific concerns.

However, there are yet many practical problems related to human rights enforcement due to 'the complex relationships among the state, the social rights of citizens and the human rights of persons' (Turner 2006, 1). And it is also important to acknowledge that this notion of 'humanity' has frequently been used with exclusionary purposes, which could only be avoided by grounding the international politics of human rights on a critical democratic project:

various routes lead us into politics, various stories brings us onto the street, various kinds of reasoning and belief [...] 'we do not need to ground ourselves in a single model of communication, a single model of reason, a single notion of the subject before we are able to act. (Butler 2004, 48)

With the possibilities offered by ICT and a transnational consciousness, disabled women are also reinvigorating these democratic and global social justice paradigms intertwined with a human rights framework. Therefore, in Castells' (1998) terms, the 'resistance identities' of disabled women should also be understood as acting like 'project identities' oriented towards the transformation of society as a whole.

The human rights umbrella, despite the limitations and challenges to be overcome, can be envisaged as a promising tool for improving women's life conditions while allowing the establishment of alliances among oppressed groups. Therefore, any feminist activist should keep in mind the relevance of contributing to these transnational and transversal networks of women's groups:

A separation of the women's movement and an exclusive focus on women's interests can lead to a privileging of white professional women at the expense of these vulnerable groups. To avoid this we need to bring feminism into conjunction with other social movements and non-governmental associations, to ensure grassroots participation. (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999, 29)

Further research is needed on theories and practices to shed light on the challenges and possibilities of alliance-building within the human rights' transnational activism, and on how claiming for diversity and difference can act as a strength rather than a weakness for any social movement.

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Notes

1. Three organizations met those criteria: Disabled Peoples' International (<http://www.dpi.org>), The World Blind Union (<http://worldblindunion.org>) and the European Disability Forum (<http://www.edf-feph.org>). The website of Mobility International USA (<http://www.miusa.org>) was especially useful for completing the list.
2. Weibernetz e.V. (<http://www.weibernetz.de/english.html>) and WorldEnable – Internet Accessibility Initiative (<http://www.worldenable.net/>).
3. All quotes were collected and selected during June and July, 2008.

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