Creating a Level playing field for disabled women

I want to begin by honouring those disabled women who have contributed to our rights as disabled people and as disabled women, and in particular, three significant disabled women who have recently died, Donna-Rose McKay, Linda Beck, and Bev Grammer.

Although disabled women have made some progress, the title of this session is still relevant. I will not outline yet again in detail the many inequalities faced by disabled women. Suffice it to say that for many disabled women the playing field is some distance away, never mind whether they can access it, or whether it is level or not.

In 2014 disabled women in New Zealand are still relatively invisible and our interests, rights and perspectives are still neglected. We are still generally left off the agenda.

There is still systemic discrimination and a lack of understanding of the issues we face as disabled women, for example, mothering our own babies, or for some women, sterilisation without their consent. Women’s health and other important information and services are still Inaccessible to us. A Google search for disabled women in New Zealand finds very little.

To continue the sporting analogy we are way behind the eight ball in international terms. That includes being behind some developing countries where disabled women are finding a strong voice.

Green MP Mojo Mathers' message to disabled women at a celebration on International Women's Day in Auckland this year was reported as

 "speak out when you see or experience injustice, identify potential partnerships to strengthen your voice and lobbying power and believe in your ability as women to make change happen."  The message was to ”inspire change.” Celebrations are important, as is inspiration. But right now much more is needed. We need concerted and collected action.

There is no longer a women's caucus in DPA. That's not because there is nothing left to do. DPA has a policy on women. I know there is one because I and others here helped to write it a long time ago. There is now only one woman on the NEC. What is the situation in other DPOs?

VIEW was founded as a move for progress and a voice for blind and vision impaired women. It has little profile now

We are forgetting our history.  The inclusion of disabled women in the 120 years celebration of women's suffrage Tirohia Mai exhibition, last year, was an attempt to reclaim it. But after the disabled women's presentation alongside the exhibition the follow up was more about disability history generally than about disabled women's history or rights. It is clear that the energy of the eighties and early nineties has been dissipated.

Ironically this has happened at a time when we have more tools at our disposal than we have ever had.

We have protection under the Human Rights Act and the Health and Disability Commission Act.

Objective 14 of the Disability strategy says "promote participation of disabled women in order to improve their quality of life."

The CRPD takes the "twin track" approach" with Article 6 focusing directly on rights for disabled women and with disabled women's issues threaded throughout. Our government is legally obliged to pay attention to disabled women's rights. And let us not forget the other UN conventions such as CEDAW, the women's convention and CROC, the children's convention.

We have the Office for Disability Issues and the Think Differently campaign.

We also have less formal, but potentially powerful tools available, in the form of the arts, the media and the Internet and the range of social media. Women With Disabilities Australia are a great example here with their networks, web site, research, and publications. There are many excellent disabled women bloggers here and elsewhere. The range of social media are very valuable tool for the growing International network of disabled women.

But in practice every other issue always seems to be more important and little work has been done on analysing what the twin track approach of the CRPD might mean today in a NZ context.

Sometimes it is difficult to focus on the gender issue. Violence against women in a disability context tends to be lost in the compelling wider issue of general violence and abuse of disabled people.

Disability is complex and nuanced and we can no longer avoid the need to unpick these complex issues.

The intersection of disability and gender seems to create a barrier to the collective imagination. I am not sure why, since other women are confronting intersection of gender and race etc with some vigour..

In New Zealand we have not developed a widely accepted discourse on women and disability. We have not applied a gender analysis to disability or a disability analysis to gender.

Disabled women are leaders, but are expected to lead on behalf of all disabled people, or maybe they are content to see leadership as individual personal achievement.

But action is becoming more urgent. As the population ages and women, disabled and non disabled live longer, the numbers of disabled women are outstripping the numbers of disabled men. There will be more increasingly frail older disabled women who are living in poverty because of a lifetime of limited education and employment options.

The response we often get is that there is no information about disabled women. That is simply not good enough. When the Disability Survey results from Statistics New Zealand come out in June this year we should expect and demand that all reports include gender analysis. We have to demand the same from everyone who collects any disability data, from MSD, the Ministry of Health, service providers and anyone else who collects and analyses population and other related information. Good information will provide a strong foundation for us to build a level playing field.

Nothing will be handed to us. Without action from disabled women the playing field will remain the same as it has always been, distinctly lumpy. It needs leadership from us.We have to make our voices heard and work together. Speak up and speak out. Let's not be seduced by individualistic approaches to progress. We have to do more, and maybe we have to do things differently.

We can look for opportunities to add a disabled women's perspective, as well as identifying and prioritising particular issues of importance to us. For example, there are opportunities for a gender perspective in the new government action plan for disability. There are also people who can be strategic allies and supporters, disabled and non-disabled. We should find them and enlist their support.

Disabled women need an active and strategic voice to make change. How we develop that voice is the question. How do we develop an analysis for the twenty first century? I am interested to hear what disabled women think on the topic. I challenge you to respond and work together to create that level playing field because no one else will do it.