

## Visiting Gender Equality Support Organization

### Women with Disabilities Empathy

Bae Bok-ju, President

#### Who We are

Women with Disabilities Empathy, an organization for improving human rights for disabled women, has conducted a variety of activities to create a society where diversity is accepted, understanding the problems of systems excluding women with disabilities. As a founding member, I have worked for the organization since 1998. Women with Disabilities Empathy was established to challenge our society's attitude toward normality. What does it mean to be normal? What are the criteria that distinguish normality from abnormality? I wanted to talk about our body, speed, and differences. Women with disabilities have been discriminated against under the so-called general and normal social structures and systems and due to a bias against persons with disabilities. Against this backdrop, we have tried to form alliances with other minority groups. The identity and independence of the disabled women's movements had to be ensured for effective collaboration. We have worked hard to make ourselves widely known to the outside world and thereby to create a society where we don't have to feel ashamed of our bodies.

It has not been easy to carry out campaigns for disabled women because of the complex discrimination they face. We have suffered from lack of resources and supporters. In other words, this movement has been worth it because of its scarcity but has suffered from lack of resources that can act as a driving force behind it. Moreover, the number of people who have interest in this area is relatively smaller than that of those who are interested in the women's movements or movements for persons with disabilities. For a long period of time, women with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream society. Fortunately, there are not many, but some people have shown continuous and sincere interest in the lives of disabled women.

I named this organization as such because I wanted to make it lovely. Also, it expresses our wishes that our society will be more sincerely empathize with our stories. In other words, we hope that the experience

of women with disabilities will be accepted and understood. We also would like to better understand the outside world. The word Empathy is neither sensitive nor political. It means that we want your attention and at the same time participate in social activities as members of society on an equal footing. It's a kind of two-way communications. True empathy is a two-way street.

#### Responses Activities on Related Issues

#### What we do at 'Women with Disabilities Empathy'

Women with Disabilities Empathy was launched as a self-help group. At first, it was a small group belonging to a bigger organization for persons with disabilities. I worked as secretary for the organization that provided financial assistance to us, offering advice on useful programs. However, we felt that our bodies are showcased for political purposes which is not our intention and decided to make an independent group in order to conduct our own activities and to let our voices be heard more effectively. Founding members worked for themselves during weekdays and held seminars on Saturdays. Authoring columns and carrying out various activities, we worked for two to three years without any office. Then, we named our group in 1998, recruiting members and holding a small but meaningful founding ceremony.

Since then, the number of members has consistently jumped, requiring us to set up an office for regular meetings among members. In 1999, a financial sponsor helped us open an office for more systematic activities. Our group was registered as a non-profit organization in Seoul in 2001. Around that time, I quit my job to work for Women with Disabilities Empathy on a full-time basis. We have also held camps and carried out training projects for women with disabilities. In the process, we heard of a special incident that occurred, to which we had no choice but to pay keen attention. Women with disabilities in Gangneung, Gangwon Province, were found to have fallen victim to sexual violence for seven years. The incident served as an opportunity for our members with physical disabilities to study intellectual disabilities. In 2002, we decided to establish and operate a sexual violence counseling center for women with disabilities. This led us to set up an independent life center for women with disabilities as part of the efforts to promote deinstitutionalization and to support out-of-institution women with disabilities to effectively adapt to society and to live an independent life. In 2011, Women with

Disabilities Empathy became an incorporated association registered with the Women and Family Policy Affairs Office in Seoul.

At present, we are giving top priority to training and education. We have operated a school for women with disabilities who have been excluded from learning and academic exchange. Every year, we operate five to six educational programs that start in April and end in November. Many women with developmental disabilities have participated in the programs. We have also managed many smaller self-help groups which include "Dancing Waist (Theatre Company)," "Please Help Us Feel More Comfortable (Personal Assistant Service Provider)," "Rainbow (Music Band)," and "Red Lips (Group for Women with Physical Disabilities in their 20s to 30s). These groups have helped women with disabilities do something meaningful as independent members of society.

#### **Gender Issues Surrounding Women with Disabilities**

According to the Welfare Act for Persons with Disabilities, there are fifteen types of disabilities that are categorized into levels 1 to 6. In this context, the main issue seems to be their experience relating to sexuality where they are regarded as sexual objects, rather than sexual subjects. What is important is that they want to perform stereotyped gender roles. In other words, they think that their femininity can be acknowledged by carrying out such roles. This relates to sexist culture but reflects realities facing such women. The National Surveys of Disabled Persons also show that women with disabilities want the government to support them to do housework or take care of their children (stereotyped gender roles) because they can't do such roles even though they should.

In connection with rights to reproduction, they should go through very complicated decision-making processes and cope with issues surrounding responsibilities and support. These include various decisions on sexual relationships, contraception, pregnancy, abortion, childbirth, and childcare.

Proper policies should be devised to ensure equal rights for women with disabilities. In other words, such women should be able to receive sex-related information and to be properly educated about contraception. Moreover, pursuant to the Mother and Child Health Act, abortion is illegal but is legally accepted in case it is done due to eugenic reasons. We have also sought ways to effectively deal with such issues.

#### **What Can Able-bodied Do for the Happiness of Women with Disabilities**

Several days ago, I had a chance to educate Supreme Court judges about sensitivity to disabilities. We are living in a society where the disabled are rarely seen, so that our disability sensitivity is deemed to be very low. It is very important for people without disabilities to understand the lives of the disabled and to raise their awareness of disabilities. In other words, we should be more sensitive to disabilities. In the past, we tried to control persons with disabilities and forced them to adapt to society led by persons without disabilities. However, now is the time for the able-bodied to improve their disability awareness and to realize how to accept people with disabilities.

Many people think that persons with disabilities should be specially considered and taken care of. However, this leads the disabled to be considered as dependent persons. In other words, if disabled persons are only thought of as those who should be unilaterally taken care of, they become passive and dependent human beings subject to consideration and care. Diverse words have been used to describe persons with or without disabilities. For example, if we use the words 'normal persons,' people with disabilities are regarded as abnormal or strange. Disabilities relate to identity, rather than what is right or wrong. Therefore, the words 'persons with or without disabilities' are deemed to be more appropriate and reasonable. Therefore, it is very important to correct wrong expressions that we use in our daily lives and to help opinion leaders including journalists, law enforcement agency members, and researchers increase sensitivity to disabilities. Such efforts should be made continuously in our daily lives, rather than as a one-time event.

We hope that persons with disabilities will be recognized as independent human beings, rather than as those who should be taken care of. At the same time, we look forward to seeing the government take necessary measures to enable the able-bodied and the disabled to be treated on an equal footing. Such people who have been discriminated against should be regarded as subjects of rights, ensuring equal interaction between persons with disabilities and the able-bodied. A balance between systems and social awareness should be maintained, respecting diversity.

## Future Plans

We plan to use podcasts and youtube to directly communicate with the public. We would like to more effectively organize our stories for more seamless communication. We published a book to celebrate our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and held a book concert. It talks about the experiences of eight women with disabilities via columns or interviews, mainly focusing on their joy, childcare experiences and agony. The gloomy stories are delivered in an easy and interesting way. In many cases, we have launched new projects when women with disabilities show their intention to voluntarily do something. For instance, when they wanted to go on a trip, camps were organized to grant their wish.