



DisAbled Women's Network of Canada

Annual Report

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National Executive Director's Report



Bonnie Brayton
National Executive Director,
DAWN Canada

DAWN Canada continued to see growth in our reach and influence both nationally and internationally during the 2016-2017 fiscal year.

As can be seen from our Key Accomplishments, our work in the areas of research, education, policy, and advocacy has resulted in real gains for women and girls with disabilities in Canada.

During this year, new legislation on Medical Assistance in Dying captured the attention of our nation. Our national president, Carmela Hutchison, has led our policy interventions and continued to raise our concerns on this issue as you can see in the article that features her work.

Addressing violence against women with disabilities has always been a major concern for our organization. This year we focused on addressing systemic barriers to violence prevention and supports through our Status of Women funded project “Legislation, Policy and Service Responses to Violence Against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women”, and through my participation on the federal government’s Advisory Council on Gender-based Violence.

As we all know, girls and young women with disabilities are our future leaders. And yet there is very little information or programs for them. This year, with funding from the Canadian Women’s Foundation, we began a project that aims to build the leadership of girls in the 9 to 13 age group.

Through our tireless advocacy, we have made our presence felt on the international stage through our participation in civil society meetings related to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Our successes are due to the hard work of our diligent team, our strategic cross-sectorial partnerships, and our insistence that the voices of women and girls with disabilities must be represented in all areas that affect our lives.

It continues to be my honour to serve as DAWN Canada's National Executive Director and I look forward to working with our dedicated staff and board in the upcoming year.



Figure 2. DAWN team: (from left to right) Renée Yoxon, Bonnie Brayton, Selma Koudri, Hanane Khales, Josée-Ann Maurais, Sonia Alimi, Tamara Medford-Williams, Karine-Myrgiane Jean-François.

Fair, Firm and Friendly: A Tribute to Carmela Hutchison



Carmela Hutchison
President, DAWN Canada

Carmela Hutchison is one of the leading feminist disability activists in Canada. She was Interim President in 2006 and was elected as DAWN Canada's President in 2007, a time when the organization was going through a major transition. She addressed governance issues within the organization by leading the process of establishing a national head office in Montreal, hiring a national executive director, and making DAWN Canada officially bilingual. These steps, along with renewed bylaws and sound financial management helped to stabilize DAWN Canada's operations. This was no small feat, as the organization had until then struggled to secure and maintain a stable base from which it do its work.

From this position, DAWN Canada has been able to significantly increase its capacity, including hiring more staff, (now three full time staff and two part time), securing more federal and provincial funding, and attracting more women with disabilities to the board.

Beyond governance, Carmela has led DAWN Canada's board with a strong vision for the organization while maintaining a deep commitment to women with disabilities and Deaf women. She has led initiatives for policy change and advocacy on some of the most critical issues for women with disabilities, including violence prevention, housing, employment, and Medical Assistance in Dying.

Carmela has developed and presented parliamentary briefs, contributed to bodies of research

and developed ground-breaking tools in the area of inclusive practice. One example is the Diversity Through Inclusive Practice Toolkit which Carmela developed while volunteering for DAWN Canada on a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) in partnership with the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW). The toolkit is a simple, practical guide for ensuring that when communities come together, everyone's needs are met.

Carmela's contributions to people with disabilities extend well beyond DAWN Canada. Her volunteerism spans more than two decades and includes a broad range of complex and compelling issues. She has made further contributions through knowledge transfer and service in the areas of peer support and mental health, poverty, addictions, disaster planning and tourism.

Carmela's work in mental health is perhaps the most measureable. She contributes many hours daily to the wellness and support of people who live with mental health and physical disabilities through connecting people to resources, helping them navigate the system, teaching self-care and self confidence and through individual and systemic advocacy.

Carmela's contribution to educating professionals and policy makers about how their interventions and actions affect those with a lived experience of mental health and/or disability issues, as well as gender issues is widely known. Her gentle, articulate openness has dispelled many of the myths about people with disabilities. Carmela's ability to bridge peer and professional relationships has led to a much deeper respect for the 'consumer' within the mental health sector.

She and her husband Bob have 'extended' their home and their family to include friends from the consumer movement – folks whose own families rejected them, abandoned them or have harmed them.

Carmela Hutchison's mantra for dealing with challenging situations is: Fair, firm and friendly. These words represent the sage advice she gives to many as well as the words she lives by. She says ...” It comes down to being able to solve problems, being willing to help and willing to show a quality called “positive leadership” which basically means approaching situations with enthusiasm and excellence. Oh! And our best service is provided when we care for ourselves”.

The issues of suicide prevention and assisted suicide are very important to her. She has counselled and supported many people who are contemplating suicide. She supports family members and caregivers of people with disabilities who are facing decisions related to Do Not Resuscitate orders or medically assisted suicide.



Figure 4. Carmela Hutchison

Carmela has served Canadians with disabilities, not only in her role as DAWN Canada's president, but also as the president of the Alberta Network for Mental Health, and as an executive member of the Council of Canadians with Disabilities.

Key Accomplishments 2016-2017

The 2016-2017 fiscal year was a stellar year for DAWN Canada. As our profile and credibility increased, we were called on to lead, contribute or partner in initiatives across different levels of government, in international meetings, with academia, and of course, with organizations across the disability, feminist and broader human rights sectors.

Policy / Advocacy:

At the government level, Bonnie Brayton, DAWN Canada's National Executive Director, was appointed to a two-year term on the federal government's Advisory Council on Gender-based Violence. The Council's task is to support the development of the Government of Canada's Federal Strategy on Gender-based Violence. As well, Bonnie was appointed as Co-chair of the Office for Disability Issues' (ODI) committee to rethink the SDPP-D funding framework. This program has traditionally provided operational funding to national disability organizations. Participating in this process gave DAWN Canada the opportunity to inject our vision and intersectional framework into the program re-design.

Medically assisted suicide was a key issue for us in the past year. Our president Carmela Hutchison invested a great deal of energy into ensuring that the voices of women with disabilities and Deaf women were heard



**Figure 5. Carla Qualtrough,
Minister of sports and persons
with disabilities**

as our parliamentarians worked to develop new legislation on assisted suicide. After the Medical Assistance in Dying laws were passed, DAWN Canada continued to raise concerns, and contributed to the development of the Vulnerable Persons Standard, a protocol for protecting people who could be vulnerable to coercion and abuse under the new legislation.

In terms of international work, we attended meetings on both the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In order to ensure gender equity is included in Canada's implementation of the CRPD, DAWN Canada participated in a meeting between civil society, Indigenous organizations and federal, provincial and territorial governments in preparation for Canada's appearance before the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and gave input on planned national accessibility legislation and on Canada's possible accession to the CRPD Optional Protocol.

DAWN Canada also participated in CEDAW consultations in Ottawa which provided an



Figure 6. (From left to right) Bonnie Brayton, Selma Kouidri, Karine-Myrgianie Jean-François, Yin Brown

opportunity to connect with other civil society organizations and representatives from federal, provincial and territorial governments in regard to the implementation of the CEDAW.

Research

On the research front, we continued our work with as part of the Violence Against Women research hub under Community-First: Impacts of Community Engagement (CFICE), a seven-year research project at Carleton University. The Violence against women research hub is focused on collaborative demonstration projects on violence against women, locally and nationally. DAWN Canada is leading a research project to develop tools to assist researchers in addressing the absence of women with disabilities/the intersectional lens in Violence against Women research and policy. We also partnered with the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) to develop a campus violence survey to determine the prevalence of violence against women with disabilities and Deaf women on college and university campuses in Canada. We also hosted a Master's student from



Figure 7. Bonnie Brayton (centre) joins national disability advocates in a press conference on Medical Assistance in Dying

France, Sonia Alimi whose thesis topic was the activism of Canadian women with disabilities in the feminist movement. Her final dissertation is entitled «Le militantisme des femmes en situation de handicap, ou la possibilité d'une convergence des luttes féministes?»

Education

Public education and awareness form an important part of what we do. During 2016-2017, various DAWN Canada representatives presented at conferences, workshops and training events. We found great allies in the labour movement through a plenary presentation to 700 delegates at the Canadian Labour Congress Conference Rise Up, as well as through presentations to the PSAC National Equity Conferences and CUPE and UNIFOR regional conventions. These presentations allowed us to explain to large audiences how gender, disability and other factors manifest in particular challenges for women with disabilities and Deaf women.

We also had the opportunity to deliver in-service workshops on health equity to health care



Figure 8. Bonnie Brayton (right) and national disability advocates discuss MAiD

workers at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, to present on violence-prevention for women with disabilities at the EVA BC annual training forum, and to share analysis of the impact of intimate partner violence as a factor that contribute to brain injury for women at the annual Brain Injury Association of Canada (BIAC) conference.



Figure 9. Bonnie Brayton in front of the DAWN banner

We also conducted two major public education campaigns this year, using primarily social media. The first is our annual campaign on Breast Cancer Awareness during October. Now in its fourth year, the aim of this campaign is to raise awareness of the barriers faced by women with disabilities and Deaf women when accessing health services. We promoted a range of resources such as our 2013 Breast Cancer Report, Get Screened PSA, Breast Cancer and Disability Infographic, Learning Brief for service providers, and blog series. This is the only campaign that we are aware of both in Canada and internationally that focuses on the specific needs of women with disabilities and breast cancer. Our second annual campaign is the 16 Days of Activism on Violence Against Women, aligned with Québec's 12 Days of Action on the same theme. During this period, we promoted our violence-prevention reports, articles, fact sheets, videos and other resources that are available on our website and conducted a Twitter Teach-in focused on the intersection of gender, disability and other intersections that increase vulnerability to violence.

DAWN Canada Advocates for Women with Disabilities Under New Medical Assistance in Dying Law

“As a woman with multiple disabilities that make me ineligible for most treatment programs, as a survivor of profound childhood abuse, my fear of physician assisted death is visceral. The entire board of DAWN Canada shares that fear, as do many of our colleagues across the disability sector.”

These were some of the statements delivered last February by DAWN Canada’s President Carmela Hutchison to the Special Joint Committee on Physician Assisted Dying via videoconferencing from the intensive care unit of an Alberta hospital.



Figure 10. Image of a doctor taking a woman’s blood pressure

In her presentation, Carmela pointed out that people with disabilities, such as herself, were particularly vulnerable to coercion, especially in a society that views disabled bodies as inferior and death as more desirable than life with a disability. Carmela described her experience in the hospital:

“I was put in hospital for an infection and put into a coma so my body could rest. When I first came out of the coma, after telling me I was restrained so I would not pull out the breathing tube, my nurse’s first words were “I know the tube is miserable, I’d kill myself if I had to have one.” She was trying to be understanding and, to be fair, many people worked really hard to save my life. But the words still hurt my feelings, because I had been very afraid to go to ICU because of MAiD. People with disabilities need to trust their doctors and nurses. We need to feel safe when we go to the hospital.”

The Supreme Court of Canada had ended the ban on medically assisted suicide and parliament had had a year to come up with new legislation. Consultations were being held; the disability community was divided in its views. But DAWN Canada, under Carmela’s leadership, was clear in its opposition to the ban, and its insistence that people with disabilities, especially women, needed protection in the absence of legislation.

After decades of activism and service, Carmela’s dedication to disability justice is unquestionable. She insisted that the issue was important to women with disabilities and that DAWN Canada should take an active role in bringing attention to it. She represented DAWN Canada at the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) Ending of Life Ethics Committee, presented briefs to parliament several times, and spoke to the media about the issue at every available opportunity.

Carmela’s work takes her across the country with a dizzying travel schedule that would

take a toll on anyone, more so for her due to her disabilities and subsequent fragile health. She explains that due to her multiple disabilities, and co-occurring health conditions, she herself would be a candidate for MAiD. She notes that many elder women and people with disabilities who do not want to die are finding themselves in this situation and are deeply fearful for their lives.

She made this point when she presented to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in May, a presentation she describes as “the fiercest I have ever given”. She describes the experience:



Figure 11. Image of an empty hospital bed

“One of the committee members made a comment in which he said it was a shame to deny people the right to die. I responded to him by saying it was a shame to spend a single dollar on medical aid in dying before doing everything possible to help people live. I told them that I qualify for MAiD, but I. will. not. go. down! And I punctuated each word by pounding my fist on the table, I was so furious. Some of the committee members responded in kind, slapping the table in support.”

In June 2016, when the new legislation, Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) was passed, DAWN Canada presented at a press conference hosted by CCD in Ottawa, and joined other disability activists in raising grave concerns about it. DAWN Canada also signed the Vulnerable Person’s Standard, a series of safeguards designed to protect Canadians who could be vulnerable to coercion and abuse under the new legislation. Carmela reflects on the Standard:

“The Vulnerable Persons Standard (VPS) was made to help protect people like us from being forced to choose MAiD when we might not want to. The VPS was also made to try to protect people with disabilities from people who might try to abuse MAiD laws to force people with disabilities to die that they do not want in their lives anymore.”

Authors of the Standard note that: “Extensive research shows that a wide range of factors related to social, financial, psychological and spiritual suffering can lead patients to request Medical Aid in Dying (MAiD).”

Carmela notes that DAWN Canada has been raising similar concerns since 1995, with the publication of *Don’t Tell Me to Take a Hot Bath: Resource Manual For Crisis Workers* by Shirley Masuda. In it, the author raised concerns that with the legalization of assisted suicide, women with disabilities would not be able to find sufficient supports to continue living, and that suicide would not be “the free and considered choice of a woman but rather an act of

compliance”. Masuda predicted that the “right to die” would become the “duty to die.”

Carmela agrees, noting that after a year the legislation came into effect, it has become clear that it is primarily women that are choosing MAiD.

“But women with disabilities do not seek MAiD because they are disabled,” notes Carmela. “It is because we lack access to suicide prevention services, trauma informed treatment, addiction services, and are often trapped, in isolation, poverty and abuse. We fall into despair because within society and sometimes within our own families we are not valued and we lack the services and supports we need to lead safe and effective lives.”

“The MAiD laws are dangerous, Carmela contends. “Even as we were present in the Supreme Court hearing the Justice say the law would not be extended, we were already listening to the law being extended. And now, these laws are being reviewed so they can be extended even further to advance directives, minors, and mentally ill people. This is serious. So it is really important for DAWN Canada to continue to work on this issue, and to ensure that women with disabilities are not subject to further abuse,” she asserts.



Figure 12. Image of a person wearing a hospital gown and using a walker

Summary of Funded Projects for 2016-2017

DAWN Canada received funding for three new projects during this fiscal year, and continued work on our existing project, “Legislation, Policy and Service Responses to Violence against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women”.

Legislation, Policy and Service Responses to Violence against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women, 2015-2018

DAWN Canada is currently in year two of a three-year project that aims to address secondary or systemic violence against women with disabilities and Deaf women. In the first phase of the project, we are examining existing legislation, policy and services related to violence prevention to uncover the underlying gaps that lead to these secondary forms of violence and to highlight any good practices we find. This Pan Canadian project is focused in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia and is funded by Status of Women Canada.

Girls Without Barriers, 2016-2019

DAWN Canada and GirlsAction Foundation began a joint initiative to respond to the realities of girls with disabilities and Deaf



Figure 13. Media Training Workshop

girls in Canada. Entitled Girls without Barriers this initiative is dedicated to the increasing participation of girls with disabilities in girl-serving programs by developing outreach, curriculum, peer support models and approaches that are responsive to all girls including girls with disabilities and Deaf girls aged 9 to 13 years old. Funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, this project also aims to shift the culture(s) of girls serving organizations to truly include girls with disabilities and Deaf girls.

Youth the Future – Focusing on Women, 2017-2018

DAWN Canada is delighted to be partnering with the Canadian Centre for Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW) on a three-year pilot project in Quebec entitled Youth the Future – Focusing



Figure 14. A group of young women with disabilities around a table with Youth the Future

on Women. Funded by Employment, Skills & Development Canada and focused on young women with disabilities and young Deaf women, this project aims to provide skills training and job preparation and the opportunity to gain real job experience.

Building Leadership Voices on Violence Against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women

Through funding from the Canadian Women's Foundation, DAWN Canada staff and board members participated in a one-day workshop delivered by Informed Opinions founder Shari Graydon. Ms Graydon provided a practical, informative and enlightening session that included instruction on how to focus your message for print (eg. op eds), electronic media (TV interviews), or for presenting to government or other decision-makers. Participants got hands on experience in writing and editing their key messages, and recording them on film. They were also encouraged to set up profiles on ExpertWomen.ca, a new database of women experts that Informed Opinions uses to increase media access to women as panelists and interviewees.

Designed as a train-the-trainer session, DAWN Canada will adapt the workshop contents in order to deliver it to women with disabilities and Deaf women at the community level. DAWN Canada's goal is to see women with disabilities and Deaf women represented in the media.



Figure 15. Media Training Workshop

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