

# DISABLED FEMINISTS

Disability Action Research Kollektive



This zine features work by

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Disabled people have existed for as long as humanity. They have been active parts of every society and liberatory movement. Yet when history is written, disability is often erased or stigmatised. This zine aims to celebrate the lives of disabled feminists. To frame disability not as a shameful individual failure that undermines one's agency, legitimacy and personhood, but as a neutral characteristic within the natural variation of humanity. Disabled people are the largest and most diverse political minority group. Structural, social and medical discrimination makes becoming disabled more likely if you are black, female, LGBTQIA+, poor, or incarcerated. When many oppressed groups individually sought liberation and equality, they sought to distance themselves from disability, rather than challenging the notion that disability itself justified unequal treatment.

Disability is a complex and multifaceted experience that encompasses a wide range of physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health conditions. The social model of disability, which emerged in the 1970s, distinguishes between impairment (a physical or mental condition) and disability (the social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with impairments from fully participating in society). This model challenges the medical model of disability, which views disability as an individual problem to be fixed or cured, and instead locates the "problem" of disability in society's failure to accommodate diverse bodies and minds.

Feminism, meanwhile, is a political and social movement that seeks to end gender-based oppression and achieve equality for all women. Feminist theory and activism have traditionally focused on issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, sexual violence, and the gendered division of labor. However, disabled women have long argued that mainstream feminism has often excluded or marginalized their experiences and concerns.

Feminist disability studies brings together insights from disability studies and feminist theory to examine the intersections of gender and disability. It highlights the ways in which ableism (discrimination against disabled people) and sexism are intertwined and mutually reinforcing systems of oppression. Talilia A. Lewis defines ableism as, "a system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence

and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave." You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism". Disabled women face unique forms of discrimination, violence, and marginalization, including higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and abuse compared to both non-disabled women and disabled men.

"Ableism must be included in our analysis of oppression and in our conversations about violence, responses to violence and ending violence. Ableism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability. Ableism set the stage for queer and trans people to be institutionalized as mentally disabled; for communities of color to be understood as less capable, smart and intelligent, therefore "naturally" fit for slave labor; for women's bodies to be used to produce children, when, where and how men needed them; for people with disabilities to be seen as "disposable" in a capitalist and exploitative culture because we are not seen as "productive"; for immigrants to be thought of as a "disease" that we must "cure" because it is "weakening" our country; for violence, cycles of poverty, lack of resources and war to be used as systematic tools to construct disability in communities and entire countries." (From *Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability* by Mia Mingus)

Feminist disability activism seeks to challenge these intersecting forms of oppression and create a more inclusive and accessible world for all. This includes fighting for reproductive justice for disabled women, challenging the stereotype of disabled people as asexual or undesirable partners, and advocating for greater representation of disabled women in media and politics. By bringing together the insights of disability studies and feminism, we can work towards a more intersectional and inclusive vision of social justice that recognizes the full diversity of human experience.



**Alison Kafer** is a Professor of feminist studies who specialises in feminist, queer, and disability theory, and author of the groundbreaking book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. The book posits that disability, feminist, and queer studies are interlinked and brings together concepts of care, and solidarity. Alison is also an originator of the concept of “Crip Time,” and the political relational model of disability. Alison became a wheelchair user after sustaining injuries in a 1994 North Carolina building fire. “I argue that decisions about the future of disability and disabled people are political decisions and should be recognized and treated as such. Rather than assume that a “good” future naturally and obviously depends upon the eradication of disability, we must recognize this perspective as colored by histories of ableism and disability oppression.”





**Audre Lorde (1934-1992)** described herself as “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet”. She confronted injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia through her writing and activism. She was born almost blind and taught herself to read at age 4. Her groundbreaking book *The Cancer Journals* was a candid depiction of her experiences which included a double mastectomy.

She wrote about the silence and isolation faced by disabled women, especially Black lesbians. She said “Your silence will not protect you. If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”



**Bonnie Burstow** (1945-2020) was a Canadian psychotherapist and leading anti-psychiatry activist. She worked to ban electroshock therapy, was a prison abolitionist, an anti-racist and an anti-fascist. Burstow had several rare disorders and became more disabled in her later life. She argued that mental illnesses were rational reactions to oppression and that women were over-diagnosed and overmedicated. Her book *Radical Feminist Therapy* discusses the role of how psychiatry is used to reinforce and justify patriarchy. She said “I’ve always seen the world as having two negative responses to people it isn’t satisfied with. Either they were ‘bad,’ in which case they went to the criminal justice system, or they were ‘sick,’ in which case they went to the psychiatric system. These are mirror images of each other – the mad and the bad.”



**Catalina Devandas Aguilar** is a Costa Rican lawyer who serves as the Executive Director of the Disability Rights Fund. She is also the Permanent Representative of Costa Rica to the United Nations, and between 2014-2020 was first United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2017 she was the first member of the UN to be granted a visa to North Korea. Devandas has spina bifida and is a wheelchair user. She has spoken of how we should be fighting for the rights of all disabled people, not just the ones that look like us.

“I don’t have multiple identities, I have one identity that compiles everything I am: a Costa Rican, a woman, a middle-aged woman, a mother, a mother with spina bifida, a wife. I have all these experiences that make this unity, and this unity has certain abilities.”



**Charlotte Perkins Gilman** (1860-1935) was an American novelist and suffragist. She created a socialist magazine called *The Forerunner* which platformed writers advocating for women's rights and progressive change. Gilman unfortunately also had white-supremacist and eugenic views. She is most famous for her short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

Inspired by her own experiences of being told to give up writing and pursue a domestic life in order to treat her nervous breakdowns, *The Yellow Wallpaper* condemned the patriarchy for causing and exacerbating women's mental illness. Responding to complaints that the story was too disturbing for readers, Gilman said "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy".

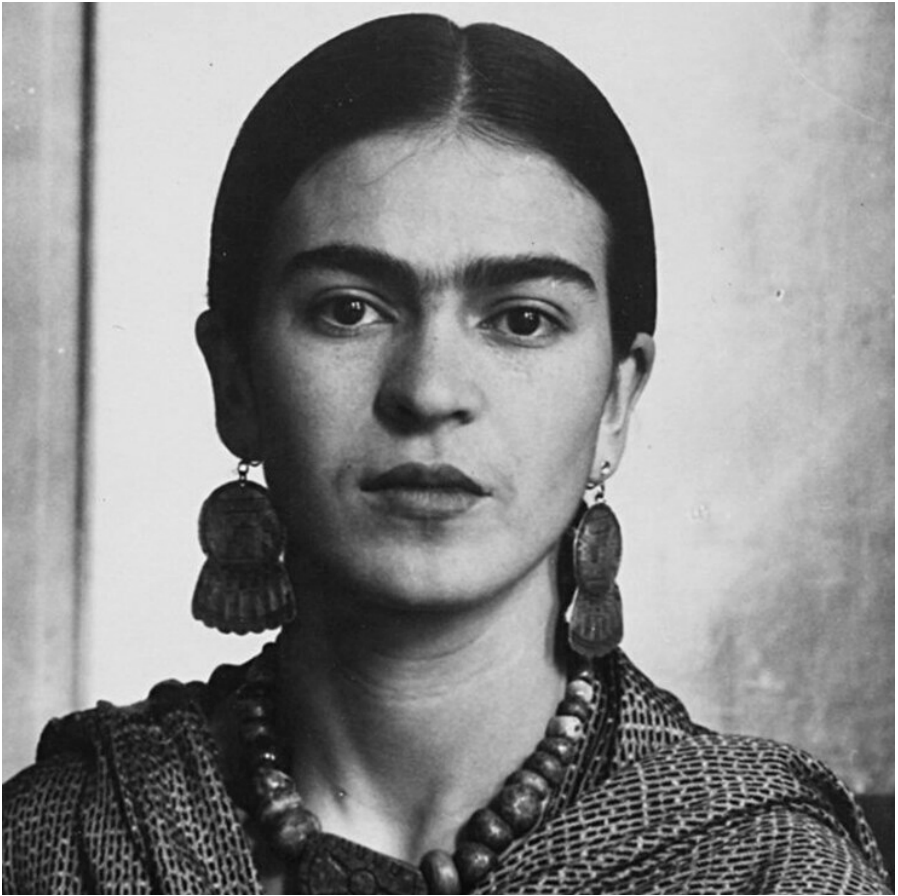


**Emma Goldman** (1869-1940) was a Lithuanian-born feminist, anarchist, public speaker and writer who advocated free speech, free love, birth control, women's equality, and labour rights. Dissapointingly, Goldman also supported eugenics. She had depression most of her life, as well as endometriosis, which caused her significant pain and made it difficult for her to travel and work. Goldman founded anarcha-feminism and was at one time considered the most dangerous woman in America by the US government. She was arrested and imprisoned multiple times for her revolutionary speeches and was eventually illegally stripped of her citizenship and deported. "The history of progress is written in the blood of men and women who have dared to espouse an unpopular cause, as, for instance, the black man's right to his body, or woman's right to her soul."



**Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977)** was the youngest of 20 children of a sharecropper family, was an African-American activist. She was a key figure in the voting, women's, and civil rights movements. She served as vice-chair of the Freedom Democratic Party, was an organiser of Mississippi's Freedom Summer, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and was a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus.

She was disabled by polio, the effects of police brutality, and a non-consensual hysterectomy. She was a wife and mother of 4 children, whom she adopted. Hamer was illiterate, leaving school at age 12. Her tombstone reads "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."



**Frida Kahlo (1907-1954)** was an incredibly influential artist who was also involved in radical politics. She was a member of the Mexican Communist Party and was a lifelong critic of US imperialism and the injustices of capitalism. Kahlo had polio and was involved in a traffic accident that led to mobility impairments as well as chronic pain. She had an adapted easel so she could paint from bed, and used her art to express her personal struggles and to challenge societal norms.

Kahlo believed in feminism and anti-imperialism. She protested US intervention in Guatemala, raised funds for anti-fascists during the Spanish Civil War. “Nobody is separate from anybody else – nobody fights for themselves. Everything is all and one, Anguish and pain – pleasure and death are no more than a process of existence”.



**Harriet Tubman** (1822-1913) was an American abolitionist and activist, perhaps best known as a “conductor” of the Underground Railroad. Born into slavery, Tubman’s skull was fractured at the age of 13 during an attempted escape. As a result, she experienced chronic pain and bouts of hypersomnia. In 1849 she escaped to Philadelphia, but soon returned to free her family.

In her later years, Tubman worked to promote the women’s suffrage cause. She travelled to speak in favour of women’s voting rights, and was the keynote at the first meeting of the National Federation of Afro-American Women. “Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars, to change the world”





**Helen Keller** (1880-1968) was an American Christian Socialist and communist. She is best known as a political figure and writer on a range of topics such as equality and social justice. Keller was Deafblind but was also an advocate of eugenics. She participated in marches to get women voting rights and access to abortions. Keller also supported labour rights, opposed military intervention and advocated for disability rights.

She said “The few own the many because they possess the means of livelihood of all ... The country is governed for the richest, for the corporations, the bankers, the land speculators, and for the exploiters of labour... The majority of mankind is ground down by industrial oppression in order that the small remnant may live in ease”.



**Helen Kirkpatrick Watts (1881-1972)** was a British disability rights activist. She was deaf and helped provide education, medical treatment, and support for children with disabilities and their families. Watts advocated for the integration of disabled children into mainstream schools and fought against the institutionalization. She also campaigned for better access to public spaces, transportation, and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Watts' tireless efforts led to significant improvements in the lives of disabled children and helped to shift societal attitudes towards disability. "The true measure of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members, and we must ensure that every child, regardless of their abilities, has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential."



**Harriet Martineau** (1802-1876) was a writer, translator and social theorist. Harriet's work, spanning a range of topics, contributed to the development of sociology, political economy and women's rights. She was also a committed activist for the abolition of slavery in the United States of America.

During her tour of the USA, she argued that women, despite claiming that they were slaves of the system, were at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement. Harriet was deaf and had an ear trumpet, though she chose not to use it to avoid harassment from others. She was an avid reader, writing fiction, travel books and political analyses. "The progression of emancipation of any class usually, if not always, takes place through the efforts of individuals of that class."



**Leslie Feinberg (1989-2014)** self-described as an anti-racist white, working-class, secular Jewish, transgender, lesbian, female, revolutionary communist. Feinberg identified as gender fluid, used the pronouns she/zie and her/hir and was considered a founder of the contemporary transgender movement. Zie had untreated Lyme disease which significantly impacted hir work, which contained themes of disability, chronic illness and the intersections of class, gender and sexuality.

Feinbergs writing laid much of the groundwork for gender studies and zie was best known for writing the novel “Stone Butch Blues”. Zie was also involved in the IWW union and was an active labour rights activist. Feinberg once said “My right to be me is tied with a thousand threads to your right to be you”



**Lola Iturbe** (1902-1990) was a Spanish anarchist who fought for the emancipation of women and for abortion rights. An untreated childhood fall left her with a permanent limp. Lola was a member of Spain's anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (CNT) and an editor of anarchist publisher *Tierra y Libertad* (Land and Freedom) and Barcelona's distributor for the magazine of the anarchist women's organisation *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women).

During the Spanish Civil War, as a correspondent for *Tierra y Libertad*, she travelled back and forth to the front line, where she would also accompany prolific US anarcho-feminist Emma Goldman on her Spanish tour. Directed to her women readers, she wrote: "Comrades: stray a little from the domestic setting, study, be bold, and enter our struggles publicly and prominently".



**Maggie Jencks (1941-1995)** was a Scottish writer, artist, and garden designer. She was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1988 and when it returned in 1993, she was given only a few months to live. She developed strong ideas about cancer survival and noticed how much better she felt when she started to take an active role in her own treatment and realised how important a patient's environment is.

She wanted a place where people could be seen as individuals and not just as cancer patients. She then put all her energies into making such a place happen and the first Maggie's Centre opened in Edinburgh in 1996. Maggie's idea was that with the right support "nobody would lose the joy living in the fear of dying when diagnosed with cancer."



**Nancy Mairs** (1943-2016) was an American author, essayist, and disability rights advocate who wrote candidly about her experiences living with multiple sclerosis (MS). Diagnosed with MS in her late twenties, Mairs became a powerful voice in the disability rights movement, challenging societal perceptions of disability and advocating for greater accessibility and inclusion.

Her essays, which often combined humor, poignancy, and unflinching honesty, explored the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of life with a chronic illness. Mairs was a staunch feminist and believed that the personal was political, using her own experiences to shed light on the broader issues faced by disabled women. "I'm only as brave as I have to be . . . and I do not want to have to be this brave." "



**Rosa May Billinghurst (1875-1953)**, was a suffragette, activist and social worker from Lewisham who campaigned for women to get the right to vote. She chained herself to the railings at Buckingham Palace, damaged post-boxes and hid rocks in her wheelchair for people to smash windows with. She would distract horses and charge police lines, using her chair as a battering ram.

The police would often tip her from the chair or let the air out of her wheels. When she was arrested, she persisted in her hunger strike even after they broke her teeth to force-feed her. She once said: "In these situations I am invaluable, a wheelchair is highly useful, the hard metal of this clumsy thing is no match against policemen's shins!"





**Rosemarie Garland-Thomson** (1946) is a humanities scholar and Professor of English, focussing on feminist disability theory. She cites 1970s feminism for giving her the idea of reframing stigmatized identity as a matter of social justice. Throughout multiple books including 'Staring: How We Look', essays and teachings, Rosemarie has studied and explored representations of physical disability and society's disposition to the visually different.

"Most of us will move in and out of disability in our lifetimes, whether we do so through illness, an injury or merely the process of aging. Still, most Americans don't know how to be disabled."



**Ruth Bashall (1952-2023)** was an activist for lesbian and disability rights. Ruth was active in the Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN) and the Greater London Association of Disabled People (GLAD). She also co-founded the Campaign for Accessible Transport, the Lesbian Mothers' Group, and Stay Safe East, an organisation run by and for disabled survivors of abuse. Ruth was a wheelchair user and contributed to many protests, from throwing paving stones at the 1968 Paris student protests to handcuffing herself to an inaccessible London bus. She was also passionate about supporting people at risk of deportation as or the threat of male violence. "A typical habit of Ruth's was the commitment she gave to those who needed her. If there was an emergency, she'd be right there, supportive, kindly and generous."



**Sami Schalk** is Professor of Gender & Women's Studies and focuses on disability studies, Black feminism, and speculative fiction. As a Black disabled woman, Schalk's work explores the intersections of race, gender, and disability, challenging dominant narratives and advocating for more inclusive and diverse representations in literature and academia. Schalk is also an editor of the "Disability Studies Quarterly" and has published numerous articles and essays on disability justice, intersectionality, and the transformative power of speculative fiction.

"As a society, we must recognize and value the lived experiences and contributions of disabled people of color, particularly disabled women, whose voices have been historically marginalized and silenced. Our liberation is bound together."



**Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012)** was a radical feminist and activist. She became involved in feminism after challenging misogyny in the 'New Left' and was a founding member of Redstockings, New York Radical Women, and New York Radical Feminists. Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex*, a key text of second-wave feminism. Her books have been criticised for containing racist attitudes. She developed schizophrenia, became homeless and spent time in a psychiatric institution. She briefly had support from an informal care network comprised mostly of postgraduate students. "Unless revolution uproots the basic social organisation, the biological family- the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled-the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated."



**Stacey Milbern Park** (1987-2020) was a Korean American disability rights activist, writer, and community organizer who made significant contributions to the disability justice movement. Born with muscular dystrophy, Park became a fierce advocate for the rights of disabled people of color and worked tirelessly to build intersectional coalitions that challenged systemic ableism, racism, and oppression.

As a queer disabled woman of color, Park brought a unique and powerful perspective to her activism, highlighting the ways in which multiple marginalized identities intersect and compound the barriers faced by disabled individuals. “Disability justice is about creating a world where everyone can show up as their whole selves and be celebrated for who they are.”



**Voltairine de Cleyre** (1866-1912) was an American anarchist-feminist writer and poet who experienced a lifelong chronic pain condition and had frequent recurring illnesses as well as depression and long-term injuries after being shot. She left a significant body of work in the form of speeches, essays, poems and stories, advocating for the abolition of capitalism and hierarchies.

De Cleyre was also a strong critic of the institution of marriage, believing that it was a trap for women, leaving them vulnerable to physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence and exploitation. "This is what the government is, has always been, the creator and defender of privilege; the organization of oppression and revenge. To hope that it can ever become anything else is the vainest of delusions."

# Would you like to know more?

## Free Essays

Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,  
by *Douglas Baynton*.

## Videos

Ways of Seeing by *John Berger*

*Rosemarie Garland-Thomson* Selective termination: reproductive freedom or disability discrimination?

*Dr Moya Bailey*: A Black Feminist Disability Framework

A Conversation with *Dr Sami Schalk* Black Disability Politics

## Books

Black Disability Politics Book by *Sami Schalk* (Free)

Bodyminds Reimagined by *Sami Schalk*

Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure by *Eli Claire*

Caliban and the Witch by *Silvia Federici*

Feminist, Queer, Crip by *Alison Kafer*

Feminist Disability Studies by *Rosemarie Garland-Thomson*

Feminism Is for Everybody by *bell hooks*

Pride Against Prejudice by *Jenny Morris*

The Cancer Journals by *Audre Lorde*

Waist-High in the world by *Nancy Mairs*

The Ha-ha by *Jennifer Dawson*

The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability  
by *Susan Wendell*

Feminist, Queer, Crip by *Alison Kafer*

The Disability Studies Reader edited by *Lennard J. Davis*

Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century  
edited by *Alice Wong*

Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice

by *Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha*

The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability by *Elizabeth Barnes*

Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation by *Eli Clare*

## Feminist Disability Organisations

Sisters of Frida (UK) [www.sisofrida.org](http://www.sisofrida.org)

Stay Safe East (UK) <https://www.staysafe-east.org.uk/>

FIND MORE



[linktr.ee/disabilityark](https://linktr.ee/disabilityark)