

A PRIMER ON WORKING WITH DISABLED GROUP MEMBERS

FOR FEMINIST /
ACTIVIST GROUPS
AND ORGANISA-
TIONS

THE BASICS:

Organisations / groups have a duty of care toward their members to ensure that basic access needs are met.

Anticipating the needs of disabled group members and meeting these needs through organisational guidelines, team training, house rules, and event specifications, means that disabled members can participate in the group without having to use their energy to advocate for their access needs.

Mandating access needs allows disabled participants to focus on the task at hand, rather than having to focus on their disability.

In an ideal world, the information contained within this guide would be common sense knowledge within contemporary feminist / activist groups. Sadly this is often not the case.

Hopefully this publication can help to promote improved inclusivity within feminist / activist communities.

DISCUSSING DISABILITY:

When discussing disability, try not to avoid the conversation because you are afraid of getting things wrong.

It is always better to say "I have no experience talking about this so I'm a bit nervous" or, "I'm afraid to say the wrong thing" or, "'is it OK if I ask questions because I'm not sure I understand this?" than to ignore a disabled person who is trying to talk to you about their experience.

Do not ask intensely personal / medical questions that you wouldn't feel comfortable asking a nondisabled individual that you are equally acquainted with.

Try not to ask a disabled person you're working with to do all of the labour required to explain their experience of being disabled or the history of disability activism. Google is your friend, make use of it.

If you know that you're working with a disabled person, or you want to become a better feminist, take some time to read up on the topic.

Do your part as an ally to educate yourself and share your knowledge with others in order to help make feminist spaces more inclusive.

PLANNING MEETINGS AND EVENTS:

Disability access needs must be considered when organizing events and group meetings; access needs are not an optional consideration.

Consider the access needs of all members when planning meeting and event locations. This includes physical, practical, emotional, economic and temporal considerations:

Is the meeting place quiet? Accessible? Welcoming? Low-lighting? Bright-lighting? Scent-free?

Is it a space that has free tap water? Gender-neutral toilets? Accessible toilets?

Is there disabled parking? Is there an accessible route from public transport to the venue?

Is there Comfortable seating? Can this be reserved?

Does entry require an ID?

Are any group reading materials available in alternative formats? Which formats?

Is the facility fitted with a hearing loop system?

Are sign-language interpreters available on request?

How long are your meetings? What time are they held?

How far are the meetings from your homes / work places?

How much does it cost everyone to travel there?

Is it possible to create a group fund to facilitate travel for those with low incomes / travel access needs?

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LOW-INCOME AND UN-FUNDED GROUPS:

It can feel intimidating to consider access needs if you are an un-funded / grass-roots organisation / group.

This primer presents an ideal scenario. Please do your best to work toward this model as diligently as you are able. You may wish to consider the following workarounds that can provide cheap or free accessible solutions to your meetings / events:

Meet in public spaces, these are often more accessible than private businesses. Try local libraries, community centres or public parks. There is often readily available access information on their websites.

Consider meeting in other grass-roots / activist spaces. These spaces will often be happy to accommodate you if you let them know about your project and your needs.

An access questionnaire is provided as an appendix to this document; if you are unable to meet all access needs immediately, you may consider sending this out to your members prior to organising a meeting or event.

SHARING ACCESS INFORMATION:

All access information relating to meetings and events should be easily visible on all flyers, websites, posters, social media posts and event listings.

It is helpful to provide an email address / phone number for those with access questions, but this should not be used instead of clearly sharing access information. Help disabled individuals know whether they can attend your event or not; don't ask them to do all of the work.

An example of helpful access information :

Venue is wheelchair accessible and barrier free. There are accessible and gender neutral toilets in the venue. There is comfortable seating (with backs) that can be reserved in advance. Free tap water is available. The sound levels may be high as this is a public cafe. The nearest public transport is 100m away. The nearest disabled parking space is 20m away. All routes accessible. No ID necessary for entry. Please contact X for more information.

Image captions should be added to all image-based social media posts. To find out how to write a good image caption spend a few minutes on google.

Think that you have to meet / hold your event in a non-accessible space? Consider whether this is really your only option. Events that claim feminist alliance and then exclude those with disabilities are hugely problematic.

If this is unavoidable, ensure that the access limitations are clearly marked on all event related material (social media, flyers, posters, event listings, websites etc.)

E.g.

There are 5 stairs from the exterior of the building to the meeting space. The stairs are steep and have no railing. No lift is available. There are an additional two stairs leading from the meeting space to the toilets. No disabled toilets available. Contact X for more information.

E.g.

The event is on the 4th floor of the building with no lift. There are no nearby disabled parking spaces. Public transport is 100m from the venue but the route from station to venue has uneven pavements that are very narrow. Contact X for more information.

CARING TIME:

It is vital to build caring time into your meetings and events. This could include the following measures:

Hold check-in and check-out rounds to discuss how group members are feeling and any positive or negative experiences of the meeting / event.

Build time into the meeting schedule for rests, pauses and thinking / processing time. The length / frequency of these could be decided at the beginning of the meeting according to group members' needs.

Keep time aside at the end of the meeting to discuss action steps and what needs to be done (if anything) in preparation for the next meeting.

Decide on the process by which group members can bring forward issues or suggestions. Will this be done in person during group check-ins? Will the group hold a monthly / weekly forum specifically dedicated to these discussions? Can members bring up issues anonymously?

Work as a group to create a set of group guidelines that ensure the safety and comfort of all group members.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT:

Ensure that group members who are unable to regularly attend meetings are kept up to date with group events / discussions etc. through alternate channels e.g. Whatsapp, email, telephone, voice notes or printed material. Help these members know that they are valued and included despite their non-regular attendance by sending a quick text, email or voicemail to say hello or fill them in about the meeting.

Assign a note-taker before all meetings start so that members not in attendance can be kept in the loop.

Consider whether face-to-face meetings are always necessary or whether video / conference calls could be used in addition / as an alternative.

Allow members with access needs to participate in alternative ways if they want to; ask them what these may be.

Remember that all individuals have different access needs; what works for one disabled person may well not work for someone else, and what worked last week / month / year may not work today, so be sure to keep the channels of communication open.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This primer was produced by disabled artist Romily Alice Walden. More information at:
www.romilyalicewalden.com

Please note that this document is created as a primer and in no way claims to contain all information necessary to become an inclusive group / organisation.

This is version 1.0 of this primer. It will be continually updated and improved. I am open to all feedback and will be correcting any omissions in future versions of the document.

Please help me to make this document more inclusive by emailing your suggestions or feedback to:
romilyalice@gmail.com

Please get in touch if you would be willing to translate this document into another language or amend it for non-European contexts.

Thank you to the following people who helped me to develop this primer: Michelle Howell, Fuchsia Voremborg, Brooke S. Palmieri, Ida soutou, Alex Jones, Robin Walden, Erica Lundström, Billy Mason Wood, Rachel Murray, Inga Zimprich, Laura G. Jones, Feminist Print Network.

ACCESS QUESTIONNAIRE:

This questionnaire is provided for grass-roots / unfunded groups / organisations who may not be able to immediately provide fully accessible meetings and events. It should not be used as a replacement for finding fully accessible venues wherever possible. It is not a feminist event if it is not disability inclusive.

PHYSICAL ACCESS:

Do you require any of the following?

- ☐ Wheelchair access
- ☐ Accessible toilets
- ☐ Accessible routes from public transport to venue
- ☐ Disabled parking. Maximum ___ metres from venue
- ☐ Step free access
- ☐ Limited number of stairs. Maximum ___ stairs
- ☐ Help with funds for accessible travel
- ☐ Hearing loop system
- ☐ BSL/ASL interpreter
- ☐ Other:

ENVIRONMENT:

Do you require the space to meet any of the following conditions?

- ☐ Scent-free
- ☐ Low-noise
- ☐ Low-light ☐ Bright-light
- ☐ Strobe-free
- ☐ Gender-neutral toilets
- ☐ Comfortable seating
- ☐ Reserved seating
- ☐ Free tap water

☐ ID-free (not required on entry)

☐ Other:

MATERIALS:

Do you require group materials to be produced in any of the following formats?

☐ Braille

☐ Large-text

☐ High-contrast

☐ Audio-translated

☐ Captioned

☐ ASL/BSL

☐ Other:

MEETING FORMATS:

Which of the following meeting formats work for you?

☐ Skype ☐ Google Hangouts ☐ Facetime

☐ Text message ☐ Whatsapp ☐ Facebook Messenger

☐ Telephone call

☐ Conference call

☐ Face-to-face:

☐ Max group size --- people

☐ Max length of meeting --- minutes

☐ Email

☐ One-to-one

☐ What is the best time to contact / meet you?

☐ Other:

ANY OTHER INFORMATION: