

IMAGES OF OURSELVES

Women with disabilities talking

Edited by

Jo Campling

Department of Social Policy, Hillcroft College

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Images of ourselves.

1. Physically handicapped women

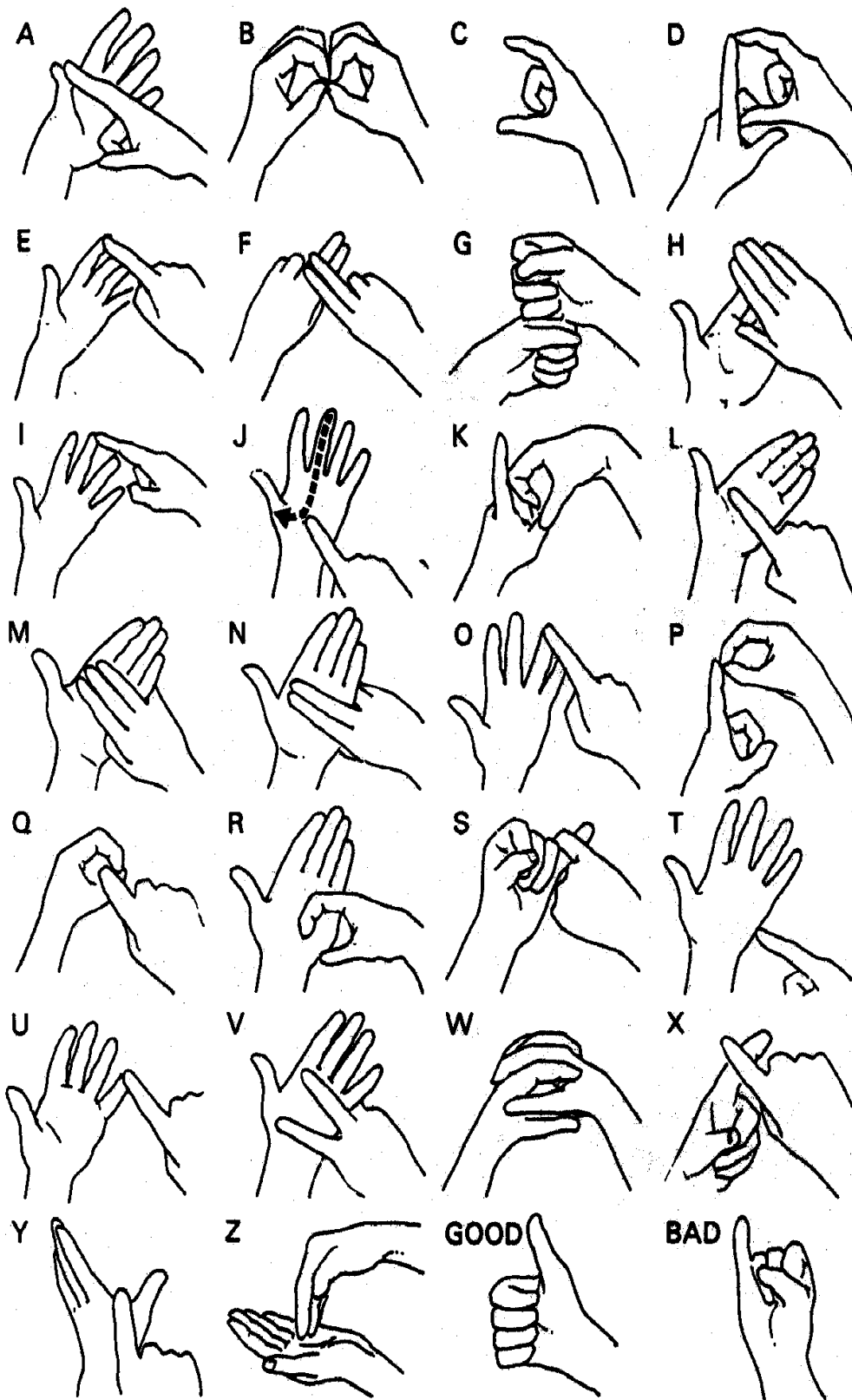
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My thanks to all the women with disabilities who talked to me, and especially to those who contributed to this book. My thanks to the friends who listened to me whilst I tried to work through my own experience, to Ros, Margaret, Rosemary and to Anna in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.



Sign language of the deaf. See Maggie, p.33

Introduction

In 1978 I was approached by Virago, the feminist publishers, to write a handbook for disabled women. As an able-bodied woman, I felt a certain diffidence in accepting the commission and my writing on disability had always been at the academic rather than the practical level. However, I had been brought up in a 'disabled family' since my mother had had polio at the age of three and I was enthusiastic about the aims of the 'Handbook' series and so I accepted. After completing *Better Lives*, I got to know a large number of disabled women, far in excess of those who originally helped me with it, mostly through letters, comments and reviews on the book. Some of them had become close friends. My reservations increased and, more significantly, my attitude and my feelings began to change radically. It was not that I felt my authorship necessarily inappropriate within the narrow terms of reference of a handbook, but rather that it had been a tentative, often inadequate beginning and that there was much more to be said in a more personal framework. Hence this collection.

I asked my friends to write whatever they wanted about their situations as women with disabilities. I rejected the idea of interviews because even the most skilful interviewer cannot help but be directive. I did not want the impromptu answer but deeply felt, considered contribution. I have written the briefest of introductions to each piece, simply to give a framework in which the reader can place the writer. I have limited the editorial function to the minimum and I have not presumed to make a commentary or interpretation. The contributions speak for themselves; anything else would be superfluous and an intrusion. Spontaneously, and without plan, all the themes which I identified in *Better Lives* emerge - personal relationships, sexuality, motherhood, education and employment as well as the practical issues such as benefits, clothing and so on. However, most of all, the writers tell us about attitudes towards women with disabilities, about their position in society and, by reflection, our own dilemma as able-bodied women. The contributors range from adolescence to old age, from a wide variety of backgrounds and from all over the country. Several are friends but the majority do not know each other. Some are feminists, some would question the use of the word, and some would reject it altogether. Some could only write with the physical help of other women. They are not professional writers, although some have written for publication before and two have published books. What they do have in common is that they are all women with disabilities.

The original plan of action for the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985, included the intention to study measures which would help disabled women lead more fulfilling lives, but for various reasons it was dropped. 1981 is the International Year of Disabled Persons, whose major aim is to promote the full participation of *all* disabled people in society. We will see. Micheline says, 'I cannot pinpoint when I first began to listen to the experiences of able-bodied women and relate them to my own.' Able-bodied women must be able to do this. We must learn to recognise

our own attitudes towards disability, relate to our experiences, isolate our guilt, and work positively on our feelings. Micheline again, 'I realised how strong women are, especially when we have to fight to overcome something, in our case our disabilities.' This book is for all of us.