Ableism (and other problems) at the Woodhull Foundation's Sexual Freedom Summit 2017

For some background, I am a disability activist and sex blogger/educator. I run Chronic Sex which is currently composed of a website, podcast (currently in its off-season), and more. My background is in advocacy and activism. I am also working with a number of people on inclusive sexuality research. I am a disabled queer trans person, a survivor of multiple forms of abuse/neglect, and a fighter. I'm also a giant conference nerd who just hours ago earned my Masters in Health Care Administration. I have worked for/with the government, non-profit agencies, other conferences (both sexuality-focused and not), pharmaceutical companies, and other domestically and internationally. The advice and comments I offer here are done so with a certain amount of expertise in organizational change, which I have been trained in and have real life experience in (in a governmental health care system, no less).

Before I really get into this, I want to say that the bloggers and other sexuality educators I encountered were generally wonderful. I had no interactions with them that were negative or made me feel uncomfortable. The blog squad is a great, supportive group and I am incredibly glad to know them and to have had their guidance with my feels and frustrations during this time. I've cc'd Lilly here as I know she wants to touch on these soon when discussing ways to improve for SFS18.

Despite everything that went wrong, I did really enjoy my time at SFS17. I would have liked to have enjoyed more of it and been able to be an active participant instead of needing to hide in my hotel room, which is what happened for much of my time there.

I also want to state that I do not blame any one person for what has happened this year or in years past. That said, this has been shown to be a systemic problem - not just at Woodhull, but at many sexuality conferences. I trust that those of you receiving this email will take this information as it is meant and without any malice that may come across in my tone. As someone harmed several times at the summit as a first-time attendee, I am frustrated and sad. I have a right to be, and that needs to be heard, validated, and witnessed.

When I found out I got to present at SFS17, I was ecstatic. Now, though, I find myself feeling very sad. The first day of the summit, I felt like I had found my people. There was such a focus on social justice and I was incredibly happy. I'm now unsure of how important Woodhull thinks disabled people are, especially after not including us in several identity-based questions in surveys.

Between this, a lack of respect for the low-scent policy, and rooms being varied temperatures, I wound up in bed early every single night. I wanted to be more social, but my body wouldn't let me due to outside influences.

The following issues have been brought up by various attendees to SFS17. As a very outspoken individual, I have pulled comments together from volunteers, presenters, bloggers, other attendees, and those following online. This communication is to express anger and frustration over ableism at SFS17. This does not address, aside from to note, other forms of marginalizations addressed poorly at the summit.

Issues to address:

Ableism

Ableist language pervaded the conference. Sessions were titled with ableist words like 'stupid' and others. Why use language with a history of oppressing people when we can be more linguistically precise and use descriptors such as ‘bad’ which is what we mean when we say ‘there are no stupid questions’ in reality?

Activists embraced and said things that were downright ableist, from refusing bodily autonomy based on disability to acting like we all must show up to be activists. Please also see:
https://twitter.com/ChronicSexChat/status/893595592978567168
https://twitter.com/ChronicSexChat/status/893594428987904001

There was a general lack of recognition of how disability or chronic illness affects sexuality. As a disabled person, even disabled sexual agency and ability to make decisions was discussed by abled people on a large stage.

The biggest problem I've encountered is that people seemed to be okay with or not pick up on ableism. Please also see:
https://twitter.com/rsocialskills/status/894245665924055041

After these comments, Woodhull's Twitter account acted as though people misunderstood what was said. A Storify was promised to 'clear' things up, but there is a misunderstanding why we were upset.

I am also shocked that only two disability presentations occurred this year. Perhaps this is as a direct result of ableism being a consistent issue.

Accessibility

Despite a request for all to refrain from using scented items, people were layering on multiple strong smells. This caused a number of issues for those of us living with autoimmune conditions, migraines, etc, to the point where several of us ended up in bed instead of being able to enjoy the conference. We need to way to highlight this and a way to enforce low-scents.

I'm unsure if anyone asked for any interpreters, but I did notice a lack of that there. Perhaps no one needed one. Aside from the blogger meet and greet, though, I don't recall any questions about accessibility needs. (Note: this could be due to registering for several conferences at the same time.)

Session rooms were not set up well for those of us with mobility issues, regardless of whether or not we utilize mobility devices. It was very difficult for people to find adequate spots to sit where items they needed to have weren't constantly being knocked into by others.

Both last year's and this year's hotels are not ADA compliant regarding numerous access points. One of the big ones is lack of appropriate directional signage. Another was no designated area for assistant/service animals to relieve themselves.

Mobility devices should be available for use (paid for by Woodhull) when hotels like those for 16 and 17 are used. When it takes a long time to get to a bathroom, water fountain, etc, it is not accessible - and often results in many of us missing sessions we'd like to attend *or* coming in late and getting the stink eye (or being simply locked out of sessions for being late).

Additionally, many of us were placed in rooms that were incredibly difficult to get to despite having mobility needs. Speaking as one such person, I could have tried to move rooms but it took 35 minutes to check in and I had no energy once I *did* get to my room to deal with this.

There was no low-sensory resting space for those of us who needed it. The blogger's lounge is *not* low-sensory. I've worked with Janssen Pharmaceuticals in the past and their low-sensory room at conferences was great. I'd be happy to talk more about making this a reality.

Accountability

Despite many of us who are disabled or chronically ill expressing concern on social media, this has not been addressed. Woodhull has tackled a few other fires, but the bulk of the interactions on this so far have been board members telling me and others that we are overreacting or taking things out of context.

This is tone policing and it's incredibly inappropriate, especially from someone in power.

Please read this thread of my tweets after removing a disabled person's sexual autonomy was brought up. Note, as well, that the leader of Tantus (and Woodhull board member) tried to tone police this. I'll touch more on the fact that a sponsor should not be on the board later, but note this for now.

When we're discussing marginalizations, it's important to understand the concerns. These things need to be heard, recognized, and addressed with more than tone policing.

Organizers acted as though they were going to respond to these issues but have not as of now. This is despite call-ins, call-outs, and pleas. However, the Screaming O situation was handled very quickly. Yes, it was more pressing, but this also deserves a quick and thoughtful response instead of gross inaction. How this has been handled so far shows those of us with disabilities that we aren't a priority.

Overly praising elders

Loretta and others being talked to during the Friday evening dinner continually spewed ableist things towards audiences. Throughout the summit, Loretta brought up the removal of disability sexual autonomy, staying with abusive family, etc. These items are hurtful and harmful to those of us who have survived abuse and/or are disabled. As pointed out above, others brought up this idea that one must show up to be an activist, which leaves out a large portion of the world due to ability, marginalizations, poverty, and more. I was happy to see Ricci try to lessen the harshness of those words, but it was still jarring - especially after so many of my fellow disabled activists were the ones taking the time to call, fax, email, visit, and protest around AHCA. Ultimately, those of us who were unable to do this work in-person already feel bad enough as it is but we *did* make a difference in this and any battle we've engaged in. This must be remembered and not dismissed as lesser.

What the experience feels like for many is that there is a process to overly praise elders involved with SFS. I don't doubt that they've done wonderful things, but we also need to point out the problematic phrases they've used and harmful rhetoric they've reinforced.

A note

These were not the only issues. As someone who is white, I cannot really speak to the racism at SFS17 aside from sharing my disdain and anger at how things were handled. Please read this post from Miriam for more {gifs in link}. These issues need to be addressed as well.

Additionally, those who were survivors and chose to attend some sessions (like this one) left traumatized and triggered instead of feeling empowered and safe. None of it was approached from a trauma-informed space aspect and no trigger warnings were used. Furthermore, the presenter chose to show a clip about DV & child murder without any forewarning or follow up. The majority of folks in the session were victims and the presenter exposed them to further trauma needlessly. Survivors in attendance left feeling as though this presentation did not have a place at this particular conference, where so many of us are survivors and on a 200 or 300 level with this information as opposed to a 101 level workshop that demands the shock value of triggering imagery.

From SFS16

Last year, other attendees faced issues that they documented and I would like to share here so that their voices are heard and respected as well.

Accessibility

Several people, regardless of ability, had difficult times being able to hear those speaking. Quality of the microphones and speaker system was subpar and distracting. Even when there were microphones, some panelists chose not to use them. This combined with background noise from the hallway and sessions in the next rooms often made it difficult to hear.

At the Saturday luncheon, a panelist had asked for people to use air/ASL claps instead of physical applause due to an accessibility need - which was then mocked several times by the other speakers at the luncheon. These kinds of reactions make many of us with disabilities feel unsafe, unable to ask for accommodations, and unwanted.

Inappropriate Comments

Comments about people's chests were made several times. Yes, this is a sexuality conference, but one also focused on consent. People did not consent to these comments being made whatsoever. This also accompanied unwanted sexual advances and other actions that were not consented to.

In a session around sex work clients, the work 'clean' was used several times to denote STI-free. This promotes stigma which is the exact opposite of what this conference's goal is. Upon being corrected by a member of the audience, the speaker made a condescending remark and continued to use this language.

What can Woodhull do to improve?

Increase knowledge on disability issues

Many people I interacted with at SFS17 did not even know what ableism was. At all.

When running a summit around sexual freedom, it's important to not assume that all in attendance will know various things on marginalized identities. It would be great for people to have a baseline knowledge at least of various marginalizations.

This is a great resource on ableist language, which needs to be avoided in session titles at the very least. I also ask that you read 6 Ways Your Social Justice Activism Might Be Ableist.

Additional resources:
What is Ableism
6 Forms of Ableism We Need to Retire Immediately
What is Ableism? Five Things About Ableism You Should Know
9 Things That Might Not Seem Ableist, But Actually Are
This Woman Wants To Educate You About Ableism
I'm Not Going To Be Nice About Ableism

Representation matters

It was jarring to note that many people on panels, in workshops, etc, speaking about disability did not live with one themselves. There are plenty sex educators and bloggers who focus on the intersection with chronic illness/disability that this should not be happening. We need to see representation, especially during the large events (lunches, keynotes, etc).

Increase accessibility

I'm prefacing this section with a note: items that need improvement under accessibility need to be worked on by a council of people with various abilities and needs. This is not something that should be being handled by one person alone, but something that requires multiple views, a large amount of involvement, and attention. With nearly 50% of American adults having some sort of disability or chronic illness (according to the CDC), *now* is the time to work on getting the larger issue of accessibility up to par - not later. Cassandra Perry, who I've cc'd here, has put together a number of accessibility standards for conferences and is a wizard at this stuff. I highly recommend using Cassandra, myself, and others with accessible organizing backgrounds to improve this.

We need a way to enforce the low/no-scent policy. To be honest, in 2017, this should be standard conference procedure everywhere, but especially in an intersectional space.

I'm unsure about if this has been happening, but making sure that image descriptions are included in photos tweeted from the Woodhull account makes it more accessible for people who have visual difficulties.

Accessibility also means working to make sure that price is not necessarily a barrier for people. As someone who has worked with/for non-profits, I understand the cash flow issues with the organization as a whole. However, setting up some ways to do live-streaming - which could additionally be monetized - may be a thing to think about as well.

In addition to this, making a point to actually respond to criticisms on social media must happen. As noted in the last section, not everyone will feel comfortable stating their concerns or sharing issues they've encountered in an email, but may on social media. Someone needs to be dedicated to watching the SFS tags during the conference and responding to issues.

Additional resources:
How to Make Your Social Justice Events Accessible to the Disability Community: A Checklist
Creating Accessible & Inclusive Meetings or Events
Creating Accessible Events
Designing Accessible Events for People with Disabilities and Deaf Individuals

Increase accountability

There was not a lot of information out there for first-time attendees without established relationships to voice concerns about ableism without resorting to social media. There needs to be better information in communication beforehand about what to do when you've encountered an issue. Several of us felt ill-prepared for highlighting issues.

One way other conferences I've attended handle some of this is to have volunteers wear shirts labeled clearly that they are a part of Woodhull and are receptive to handling issues. This has been incredibly effective at conferences, both incredibly large and small, and I would highly recommend this happen at Woodhull in the future. At the very least, having a Twitter account that is specifically set up to handle issues would be good.

There needs to be a transparent and upfront admission of "we fucked this up this year" and a way to move forward. This must be done without tone policing, attacking or getting defensive, and recognizing intersectionality and marginalizations. Apologizing - and publicly - must be done for healing as not everyone will speak up about the issues I've shared here. Transparently working for improvement may help to heal bruised and broken relationships with bloggers and others who have been harmed at the conference in years passed.

Additional resources:
9 Phrases Allies Can Say When Called Out Instead of Getting Defensive
Getting Called Out: Why Acknowledging Oppression Matters More Than Your Hurt Feelings

Increase response for concerns voiced via social media

When the Woodhull account says that they plan to address issues, there needs to be some sort of timeline set up in order to create more accountability. Stating a Storify will be created without actually creating one creates a false sense of accountability that those of us harmed by whatever was said see straight through.

Obviously, we all know that life happens while we plan and I doubt anyone would be too strict if things are later and an explanation is given. An effort needs to be made, though.

Anonymous Reporting

It would be wonderful to have an anonymous way to report issues that we encounter as well. Many do not do so as they feel it will affect which sponsors work with them as affiliates, etc, or they have been sponsored to be there and do not want to seem ‘ungrateful.’ Even the feedback form is not as anonymous as it should be. Survey Monkey has a feature, for example, where you can enter the email after submitting an evaluation as a separate item. This is more anonymous, not linking emails entered for a contest to feedback given. This kind of process should be utilized for surveys if you want to 1) increase responses about actual issues, and, 2) increase any form of feedback given.

(As a side note, Woodhull’s Twitter had been following both my personal and the Chronic Sex Twitter accounts. Once I brought up criticism, I was unfollowed on both. It seems as though this was not coincidental - and is likely part of why people don’t speak out about issues, regardless of where that happens.)

Separation of sponsors and board members

Board members should not be those who work with sponsors. This presents a large conflict of interest and would not be allowed at any other conferences. In order to be taken seriously by those in academia and outside of those of us immersed in sexuality work, this ***has*** to happen. It is especially interesting that several board members pointed out similar conflicts of interest in the government without seeing the irony in their statements.

The list goes on

There are a number of things that need to be improved with Woodhull. This list is just a start - low-hanging fruit, if you will.

I have written off conferences I’ve attended in the past for far less than what I’ve seen, experienced, and heard about Woodhull. However, out of respect for those of you involved and those who attend the conference every year, I wanted to reach out with these issues and do what I can to improve Woodhull.

Those of us who bring up these and other issues just want to see improvement. As multiply marginalized people, we want to see a space that claims to be safe and intersectional strive to be *actually* safe and intersectional.

Marginalized people should be being centered. We should be having presentations on various aspects of marginalization, privilege, and identity with regard to sexuality. We should be discussing how to continue working despite the current political climate, yes, but do so in a way where we protect the most vulnerable. As a disabled queer trans person, I did not feel protected at Woodhull. I did not feel safe. I'm not alone in that, and that's not okay.

What next

I know that Hot Octopuss will be reaching out as I've written a write-up for them and highlighted that ableism was an issue this year, so look for that. They want to check in before they publish. It's a very small part of the write-up but enough.

As a disability activist and sexuality educator/blogger, I want to offer to the best of my abilities to help improve Woodhull. Note that this would not be 'free' work, but this would be expected to be compensated, whether financially or with free registration to SFS18. That can be determined down the line. I also know that I am not alone in this, and most of the people in the disability/sexuality world want to do what they can to make Woodhull better.

I've written this document out as a blog post as well, but have not published it. Instead, I want to give Woodhull a chance to read over and respond to this to improve the conference before I go all out in sharing the nitty gritty.

I look forward to your timely response here, since it did not happen on social media (to the dismay of myself, several of my affiliates, and a few SFS sponsors).