

THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, 22 MAY 2007

At the recently held Forum on Public Transport for Disadvantaged Groups in Penang, the State Executive Councillor, Datuk Dr Teng Hock Nan was quoted in the media as saying that a survey on the needs of the wheelchair bound will be conducted before RapidPenang can introduce disabled friendly buses for them. He then went on to say “we must first identify the main areas where wheelchair-bound passengers live and the places they normally travel to.”

The Women’s Centre for Change, Penang (WCC), as one of the organizers to this forum would like to highlight two basic issues.

1. The discussion on disabled friendly buses should not focus on the needs of the wheelchair users alone. At the above mentioned forum, the additional difficulties faced by the visually impaired, the hearing impaired and the intellectually impaired when they use public transport were also voiced. Hence a more holistic approach to providing barrier-free public transport for all is required. When considering the needs of the disabled, it is not just the bus which needs modification but also the access route/pavement to the bus stop, the bus stop itself and very importantly the attitudes of the bus driver and the conductor (if any).

2. The comment that “we must first identify the main areas where wheelchair bound passengers live and the places they normally travel to” suggest that there is no comprehension that a) disabled people live everywhere and b) disabled people may choose to go anywhere. The state of the public transport in Penang is effectively denying disabled people this right of freedom of movement and hence opportunities to participate in and contribute to society.

It is obvious that those involved in making and implementing policy decisions regarding public transport need to be informed and sensitized regarding the broader issue of disability, the rights of the disabled and independent living. Constant pressure must be applied to the state government to produce a barrier-free environment and accessible transport for all.

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