

A matter of human rights

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Opinion

Dealing with discrimination is a daily reality for people with disabilities, but with the right support it is possible to fight it, writes Katrin Langensiepen.



Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

We need a change of mindset when we think about disability. EU disability policy is not an act of generosity; it is a matter of human rights, one that touches the very essence of our democratic values.

It is the commitment to a society that allows everybody to participate equally in political and public life. To date, EU Member States have failed to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which legally binds them to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of persons with disabilities.

As the EU population ages, the numbers of citizens affected by disability grows. By 2020 one-fifth of the EU population is expected to have some form of disability. People with disabilities are still discriminated against in many aspects of their lives.

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There are countless examples where they are not treated as equal citizens. Discrimination in access to the labour market, transport, goods, services, information and communication as well as limited opportunities to participate in political, public and cultural life remain an everyday reality.

Around 29 percent of all persons with disability currently live in a state of poverty and experience social exclusion. In Germany, women with disabilities are affected by sexual abuse two to three times more frequently than other women.

Meanwhile, only half of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 75 percent for persons without a disability. This makes living more a matter of survival than of participation.

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As the only female MEP with a visible disability, I know how hard it is to experience both explicit and subtle discrimination. Yet I also know, given the right support, it is possible to fight this.

Inclusion is a matter of social and political will, which is why we need to treat it as a priority. In order to change the current situation, the European Commission needs to adopt a strong European Disability Strategy 2020-2030 that addresses the CRPD as well as the Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

With the Disability Strategy 20102020, the European Commission has shown its commitment to advance policies and legislation on the issue. Despite these efforts, progress has been limited and not all policy areas were covered.

This was the case for the European Accessibility Act, in which the directive's final scope leaves out vital products, services and infrastructure, such as transport stations and vehicles, the built environment, health care, education or housing.

To fill the gap, we need an ambitious strategy that mainstreams disability rights in all EU laws, policies and programmes. Disability rights are transversal; they need to be considered in all policy fields, from employment, transport, housing and health to education.

If we want to ensure the implementation of EU legislation in Member States, it is essential to have an adequate budget, a clear time frame and a well-resourced monitoring mechanism.

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The current absence of comprehensive data is a problem. Measurable and comparable quantitative and qualitative indicators, including on accessibility, equality, employment, social protection, health and school outcomes, are crucial for assessing CRPD compliance.

I want to give two examples of policy measures that should be addressed in the new strategy. First, EU funds should not be spent on projects that do not comply with the CRPD, in particular on constructing institutional care settings that prevent persons with disabilities to live an independent life at home.

To ensure intelligent and inclusive funding, disabled persons’ organisations should be included in the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) monitoring committees.

Second, we need to harmonise disability assessments across the EU. Due to the substantial differences between national assessment systems, people with disability risk not being covered by social protection when moving and traveling between EU countries.

In order to guarantee access to disability-related support and services throughout the EU, an EU-wide recognition system of national disability ‘status’ could be introduced via a European Disability Card that is valid in all Member States.

Another issue that should be prioritised in the next five years is the adoption of an anti-discrimination legislation. For more than ten years, the Council has been blocking the Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment outside the labour market, irrespective of age, disability, sexual orientation or religious belief.

Germany is one of the Member States that is blocking the directive, which is an absolute scandal and must be addressed by new negotiations.

These, and other measures, should be discussed through an improved inter-institutional governing system, bringing together the Council, the European Parliament and the European Commission more frequently.

With Helena Dalli designated as “Commissioner for Equality”, the Commission has taken a step in the right direction. I am excited to see what will follow and I will be there to push for a strong European Disability Agenda.

About the author

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