Creating Meaningful Change: Women, Intersectionality, and Disabilities

Focus: Understanding Disability Through a Social Lens

- Shift from viewing disability as an individual problem to recognizing it as a societal issue shaped by ableism and intersectionality.
- **CRPD Article 6**: States Parties recognize that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination and are required to take measures to ensure their full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

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How Ableism Disables People?

- **Traditional Models of Disability:**
  - Medical Model: Views disability as a problem within the individual.
  - Charity Model: Reinforces stereotypes by seeing people with disabilities as passive recipients of care.
- **Social Model of Disability:**
  - Focuses on societal barriers (e.g., inaccessible environments) rather than individual impairments.
  - Example: A wheelchair user is disabled not by their wheelchair but by the lack of ramps and accessible infrastructure.

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Intersection of Ableism and Sexism: Compounded Barriers for Women with Disabilities

- **Employment Discrimination and Economic Inequality**
  - Employment Discrimination **:**
    - Only 49% of women with disabilities in the EU, aged 20-64, are employed, compared to 53.9% of men with disabilities in the same age group.
    - Women with disabilities constitute 25.9% of the total female population in the EU and 60% of the overall population of people with disabilities.
  - Disparities in Full-Time Employment**:**
    - Only 20% of women with disabilities are in full-time employment, compared to 29% of men with disabilities, 48% of women without disabilities, and 64% of men without disabilities.
  - Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion**:**
    - 29.5% of women with disabilities are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, compared to 27.4% of men with disabilities.
    - Women with "severe" disabilities are even more affected: 33.9% at risk compared to 34.2% of men with "severe" disabilities.

  (Source: European Disability Forum, "Disability and Gender Gaps: Addressing Unequal Employment of Women with Disabilities," September 2022)

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Intersection of Ableism and Sexism: Compounded Barriers for Women with Disabilities

- **Increased Risk of Violence and Abuse**
  - Article 16 of the CRPD: Calls for protection of persons with disabilities, both within and outside the home, from all forms of exploitation, violence, and abuse, including gender-based aspects.
  - Limited Data and Lack of Consideration:
    - Insufficient data on violence against women and girls with disabilities, especially in closed settings (e.g., institutions, asylum centers, psychiatric hospitals), and on disability-specific violence (e.g., forced sterilization).
    - Emerging forms of violence, such as cyber gender-based violence, and violence in schools and workplaces are often overlooked.
  - Statistics on Violence:
    - Women with disabilities are 2 to 5 times more likely to face violence than other women.
    - 34% of women with a health problem or disability have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner in their lifetime, compared to 19% of women without disabilities.
    - 61% of women with a health problem or disability have experienced sexual harassment since age 15, compared to 54% of women without disabilities.

    (Source: European Disability Forum, May 2021

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How Shifting Our Thinking Leads to Meaningful Change?

- **Focus on Structural Change**: By shifting our perspective from seeing disability as an individual issue to recognizing it as a result of societal barriers, we move from "fixing" the disabled person to "fixing" the structures that exclude them, fostering a more inclusive society that accommodates diverse needs.
- **Shift in Narrative**: Disability is viewed not as a deficiency but as a natural aspect of human diversity. This narrative fosters a culture of empathy, understanding, and acceptance.
- **Promote Core Values**: Embracing values such as tolerance, empathy, and understanding forms the foundation for this shift, ensuring people with disabilities are treated with respect and equality.
- **Policy Changes and Personal Responsibility**: This shift in thinking leads to advocating for comprehensive policy changes, promoting accessible environments, and encouraging personal responsibility in fostering inclusivity.
- **Broader Impact of Recognizing Intersections**:
  - Understanding how different forms of oppression, like ableism and sexism, are interconnected encourages addressing broader issues of discrimination and inequality, ultimately leading to a more just and equitable society.

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Challenges and Solutions for People with Disabilities

- **Core Issue**: Lack of implementation and compliance, not policies.
- **Accessibility Rights**:
  - A fundamental right under **CRPD Article 9**.
  - The **European Accessibility Act (EAA)**, effective from 28 June 2025, requires essential services and products in Europe to meet minimum accessibility standards.

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How does the lack of implementation manifest in terms of disabled people's day-to-day reality?

- **Physical Accessibility**
  - Case Study: Young intern in a wheelchair faces daily challenges with inaccessible public transport (Source: RTBF & Cap48, 2023).
  - As of January 2022, only **4.5%** of rail stations were accessible to people with reduced mobility (Source: Passe le Message à ton Voisin, cited in Brussels Times, 2022).
- **Intellectual Accessibility**
  - Digital Accessibility:
    - In March 2024, a study by Eleven Ways found that only **41.6%** of Belgian government websites had an accessibility statement updated within the last two years.
    - **18.3%** of websites do not mention dates at all.
    - Only **64%** of websites mention where citizens with disabilities can go with questions or complaints, violating legislative requirements (Source: Eleven Ways, 2024).
  - Visual Accessibility:
    - More than **94%** of Belgian websites do not comply with mandatory accessibility rules for people with disabilities (Source: Craftzing, 2024).
    - **71%** of websites have inadequate color contrast, making it hard for people with color blindness to read content.
    - Lack of descriptions for links (**63%** of sites), images (**33%**), and buttons (**18%**) further complicates navigation for visually impaired users.
    - Belgium ranks **7th** out of 18 European countries for website accessibility, with Norway scoring the best and Hungary the worst (Source: Craftzing, 2024).

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- **Political Commitment**
  - Symbolic gestures aren't enough; real advocacy needs ongoing dialogue and genuine action.
- **Consequences of Inaction**
  - Systemic exclusion leads to missed opportunities for growth and contributions to society.
- **Steps Forward**
  - Actions Needed: Invest in infrastructure, raise awareness, involve people with disabilities in decision-making.
  - Key Focus: Ensure sufficient budget allocation for true inclusion.
- **Conclusion**
  - The problem isn’t a lack of policies, but a failure in implementation and compliance. Accessibility is a right, not a privilege. Real change requires action, proper use of resources, and a commitment to creating an inclusive society.

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Upcoming Book: Disability and Politics of Inclusion: Do You Hear Me?

- **Overview**
  - A personal and academic exploration of disability, identity, and the politics of inclusion.
  - Examines how democratic societies handle the complexities of disability and the barriers to achieving true equity.
- **Core themes**
  - Redefining "normalcy" and embracing fluid identities.
  - Impact of cognitive biases on policy and equity.
  - Bridging the gap between democratic ideals and real-world experiences of disability.
- **Why this book matters**
  - Calls for a more equitable approach to disability rights and representation.
  - Challenges existing frameworks to better support diverse identities.

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