

On 19 June 2014 in Brussels, Belgium, IGLYO held the third in its Roundtable Series on Intersectionality, focusing on (dis)abilities. The event brought together representatives of the European Disability Forum (Brussels, Belgium), the European Network for Independent Living, ILGA-Europe (Brussels, Belgium), Tandem (Athens, Greece), the European Parliament LGBT Intergroup, and independent disability and LGBTQ activists. For the purposes of this statement, participants decided to use the term “people with (dis)abilities” while acknowledging that there are various other terms that are accepted and used by people with (dis)abilities, such as disabled people, users and survivors of psychiatry, people with mental health problems, etc.

The participants agreed that disability should be understood within the framework of the so-called social model, which is also the ruling paradigm of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with (dis)abilities (CRPD). The social model is based on the premise that sensory, physical, intellectual, psycho-social, and other impairments are met with physical (including relating to information and communication), attitudinal, and institutional barriers in society, and it is these barriers that hinder the full and effective participation of people with (dis)abilities on an equal basis with others.

The participants recognized that LGBTQ people are a diverse group and that some of us have (dis)abilities, which may or may not be visible; some of us may also politically identify as having a disability. Equally, people with (dis)abilities do not constitute a homogenous group either: many are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The roundtable also acknowledged that people with (dis)abilities can have various types of impairments. Each person with a disability has their own identities and support needs, neither of which should be assumed.

The roundtable highlighted the numerous barriers that LGBTQ people with (dis)abilities face in our societies on a daily basis: they are often desexualized entirely or assumed to be straight and cisgender unless otherwise stated. People with (dis)abilities often lack access to sex education and information in general. Their assertions about their sexual orientation and gender identity are often ignored, questioned, pathologised, and silenced. Their access to the LGBTQ community and its resources are limited as they are routinely placed in residential institutions and/or appointed a guardian in charge of making decisions for them. Some may feel discouraged or scared to disclose their sexuality in fear of stigma and discrimination. All too often, they encounter carers, family members, guardians, or personal assistants who do not support them in identifying and living as LGBTQ.

The participants reaffirmed the basic principles of the CRPD, including respect for dignity and autonomy—including the freedom to make one’s own choices—non-discrimination, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, equal opportunities, and accessibility. The participants stated that these standards must be applicable to all people with (dis)abilities, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The roundtable agreed that IGLYO and its member organizations should proactively work to ensure that people with (dis)abilities are included and can fully and effectively participate in their work, including at events, as members, or in leadership positions. In the spirit of “Nothing about us without us,” LGBTQ organizations should first start a conversation about concrete steps to be taken with the inclusion and leadership of people with (dis)abilities and their representative organizations. We therefore encourage a closer collaboration between LGBTQ and disability activists and organizations at the national and international levels.

The roundtable identified some examples that could be helpful. Increasing the awareness of disability rights organizations about sexual orientation and gender identity, and the awareness of LGBTQ groups about disability is essential. Visible role models who are LGBTQ people with (dis)abilities and who are active in disability/LGBTQ organizations could empower others to join the movements. There is a need to ensure offices, venues, events and resources are accessible: this may mean providing easy-to-read versions of publications, physical adjustments to spaces, flexible hours, quiet spaces, or the usage of Braille. Additionally, organizations should also consult each person about their particular needs in a given situation and provide so-called ‘reasonable accommodation’ to meet these needs. Outreach should always be proactive and visible. There is also a clear need for more research on the situation of LGBTQ people with (dis)abilities.

IGLYO extends its thanks to the participants of the roundtable for the rich discussion of disability. Through the Roundtable Series on Intersectionality, IGLYO is hosting meetings on gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status along with a concluding roundtable bringing together rapporteurs from each of the meetings.



Government of the Netherlands