



European
Commission

EUROPEAN DAY OF **PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

ACCESS CITY AWARD 2023

24-25 NOVEMBER 2022



CONFERENCE REPORT

#EDPD2022
#EUDisabilityRights
#UnionOfEquality
#EUAccessCity

Social Europe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

European Day of Persons with Disabilities Conference

The European Day of Persons with Disabilities (EPDP) Conference took place in Brussels on **24 and 25 November 2022**, bringing together disability stakeholders and advocates, policymakers, and high-level experts from across the European Union. Exchanging knowledge, sharing experience, getting to know each other and reconnecting following the Covid-19 pandemic were key elements of the event. A ceremony for the 2023 Access City Award, which recognises and celebrates cities' actions to become more accessible to persons with disabilities, was held at the end of the Conference.

Key statistics that give an indication as to the scale of the challenge faced include the fact that **almost 1 in 3 persons with disabilities is at risk of poverty** (compared with 1 in 5 for persons without disabilities) and the persistent disability employment gap (23% last year). These are compelling reasons to **continue working on the rights of persons with disabilities** and creating fora such as the EPDP to raise awareness about the challenges.

Highlights included discussion about the various European Commission initiatives, specifically the **Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, including the Disability Employment Package as well as the upcoming European Disability Card and the AccessibleEU resource centre.

Session 1: Young persons with disabilities

During session 1, **young persons with disabilities** explained the challenges they faced and how they had overcome them. The importance of making it easier for young persons with disabilities to access education (including the Erasmus programme) and the labour market as well as to attend events were highlighted. During the discussion, there was a recommendation (especially for those living in remote areas and those not able to access traditional means of education) to make use of digital tools, allowing persons with disabilities to access education via the internet with online teachers and professors. With regard to the labour market, a suggestion was made to work with employers on overcoming obstacles in terms of how open they are to work with young persons with disabilities. To achieve that, bringing stakeholders together is key.

Session 2: Global instruments to protect the rights of persons with disabilities

During session 2, speakers talked about the **existing global instruments to protect the rights of persons with disabilities**. In a show of hands at the beginning of the session, the majority of participants indicated that life was better for persons with disabilities after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In connection with the UNCRPD, it was noted that, in relation to the EU review, organisations can submit alternative reports. This has been done by the European Disability Forum and by several of its members.

During the discussion, it was pointed out that, in the context of **the cost-of-living crisis**, the UNCRPD addresses emergency situations in its standards and that States need to properly devise budgets for human rights and allocate sufficient resources for the necessary support.

Session 3: Violence against persons with disabilities

During session 3, speakers discussed how to **address the problem of violence against persons with disabilities**. The session took place on 25 November, coinciding with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. In that context, the Commission is due to table a proposal for a Directive on violence against women and domestic violence and is setting up a common EU number for helplines for victims of violence against women (116016), to be operational in the second half of 2023.

In connection with the problem of violence perpetrated against older persons living in institutions, recommendations for institutions for older persons included sufficiently trained staff, awareness raising campaigns and an independent body to which incidents of violence can be reported. With regard to bullying in schools, the **Alles over Pesten campaign in Belgium** includes a prize for schools with a good anti-bullying policy and is bringing together organisations to work together on the problem, for example by sharing anti-bullying material and coaching activities. It was noted that the issue of bullying against children with disabilities should be addressed specifically.

In relation to the problem of **violence against persons with disabilities in the war in Ukraine**, the Ukrainian National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities has been providing lifesaving activities and humanitarian assistance to deal with the many challenges from the outset. It was noted how much support is still needed given the hugely difficult situation.



OPENING SESSION

Speakers:

Helena Dalli, *EU Commissioner for Equality*

Ioannis Vardakastanis, *President of the European Disability Forum (EDF)*

Martina Štěpánková, *Czech Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs*

Alison Crabb, *Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit, European Commission*



Participants were welcomed to the Conference by **Alison Crabb**, the Head of Unit for Disability and Inclusion at the European Commission, who noted that this was an important opportunity for everyone to exchange knowledge, share experience, get to know each other and reconnect following the Covid-19 pandemic.



EU Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli, set the scene for the conference by talking about the difficult geopolitical context, including the severe impact on persons with disabilities of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. She underlined the importance of the EU's Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mainstreams disability across all policy areas, and the Disability Platform set up to bring EU Member States, organisations of persons with disabilities and the Commission together to make the commitments of the strategy a reality.

In September 2022, the Commission launched a **Disability Employment Package** to support EU Member States to improve the labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities. The Strategy calls on EU Member States to set national targets by 2024 to increase the employment rate of persons with disabilities and to reduce the employment gap between persons with and without disabilities.

A major initiative for 2023 is the proposal for a **European Disability Card**, whose aim is to promote free movement and ensure equal enjoyment of rights for persons with disabilities by facilitating mutual recognition of disability status across the EU.

Also of note is **the AccessibleEU resource centre**, whose aim is to support the implementation of accessibility legislation across the EU and bring together accessibility stakeholders to build a community of practice.

"As we work to implement the strategy, today's conference is timely. In line with the aims of the European Year of Youth, we must start by helping young people with disabilities. This means ensuring they are included and able to fully participate in this process. Our action must start with youth if it is to be sustainable, and it is why I believe it is important that we listen to the powerful young voices here today."

Helena Dalli, *EU Commissioner for Equality*



Ioannis Vardakanstanis, the President of the European Disability Forum (EDF), warmly welcomed everyone back after the pandemic and described the EU's Disability Strategy as a "joyous moment for all of us". However, he noted the gloomy context, with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 leading to many people being killed or injured, many uprooted and many Ukrainians having lost everything. He also highlighted the struggles faced by Ukrainians with disabilities. In times of crisis, persons with disabilities are the first to be left behind and have their basic rights neglected. He went on to praise disability organisations for their response to the crisis.

"Our members have worked with us tirelessly to ensure that persons with disabilities fleeing Ukraine were able to seek safety and shelter in neighbouring countries and gain access to the support they required and for those remaining in Ukraine to receive humanitarian aid. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank all those colleagues, among which there are many with us today, who worked so quickly and relentlessly to support Ukrainians with disabilities in the worst situation of all."

Ioannis Vardakanstanis, the President of the European Disability Forum (EDF)

He referred to violations of the human rights of persons with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic and, with regard to the particular impact of the explosion in the **cost of living** on persons with disabilities (who are much more at risk of poverty), he urgently called on EU institutions and the governments of EU Member States to take swift action to address the specific situation of persons with disabilities.

Looking ahead to 2023, he noted that the European Disability Card is a very important initiative with horizontal application to all persons with disabilities in the EU. He also stressed the importance of **mainstreaming disability rights** in all legislation, and tackling, with strong legislation, violence against women and girls with disabilities. In addition, he stressed the need to ensure that the AccessibleEU resource centre has the capacity, human resources, and financial resources to guide, monitor and implement accessible legislation in Europe and to come up with new proposals in collaboration with the disability movement. "Nothing about us without us' should guide us as a deep disability rights ideology," he concluded.



Martina Štěpánková, the Czech Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, described promoting inclusion of persons with disabilities as one of the key priorities of the Czech Presidency in the field of employment and social policy. One of the highlights was the **High-level conference on the inclusion of persons with disabilities** in the labour market on 20-21 September 2022, during which the EU Disability Employment Package was launched.

She referred to an upcoming **set of Council conclusions on labour market inclusion**¹, which aim to identify key challenges and obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing in the labour market and to provide recommendations for EU Member States and the Commission for future work in this agenda. The conclusions stress the need for efficient cooperation between all relevant actors, such as employment services, social services, organisations of persons with disabilities, vocational rehabilitation services and other.

"I hope that the activities of our Presidency together with important efforts by the European Commission, the European Disability Forum and other actors will contribute to make a significant step forward towards achieving truly equal opportunities for persons with disabilities and therefore participation in the labour market and society."

Martina Štěpánková, the Czech Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs



¹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14495-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

SESSION 1: YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Speakers:

Tamara Byrne, EDF Youth Committee and self-advocate and active in Inclusive Ireland

Sarah Talbi, Belgian national champion of the European Commission's communication campaign 'Together for Rights'

Lucia Alonso, Erasmus + beneficiary

Panagiotis Chatzimichail, European Youth Forum, Board member

Moderator: Jakob Rosin, President of the Estonian Blind Union



Jakob Rosin welcomed the first panel, stating that to build the Union of Equality, it is key to listen carefully to young persons. The session focused on ensuring that young persons with disabilities can enjoy their lives to the fullest. Four young persons with disabilities shared their experiences in the panel.





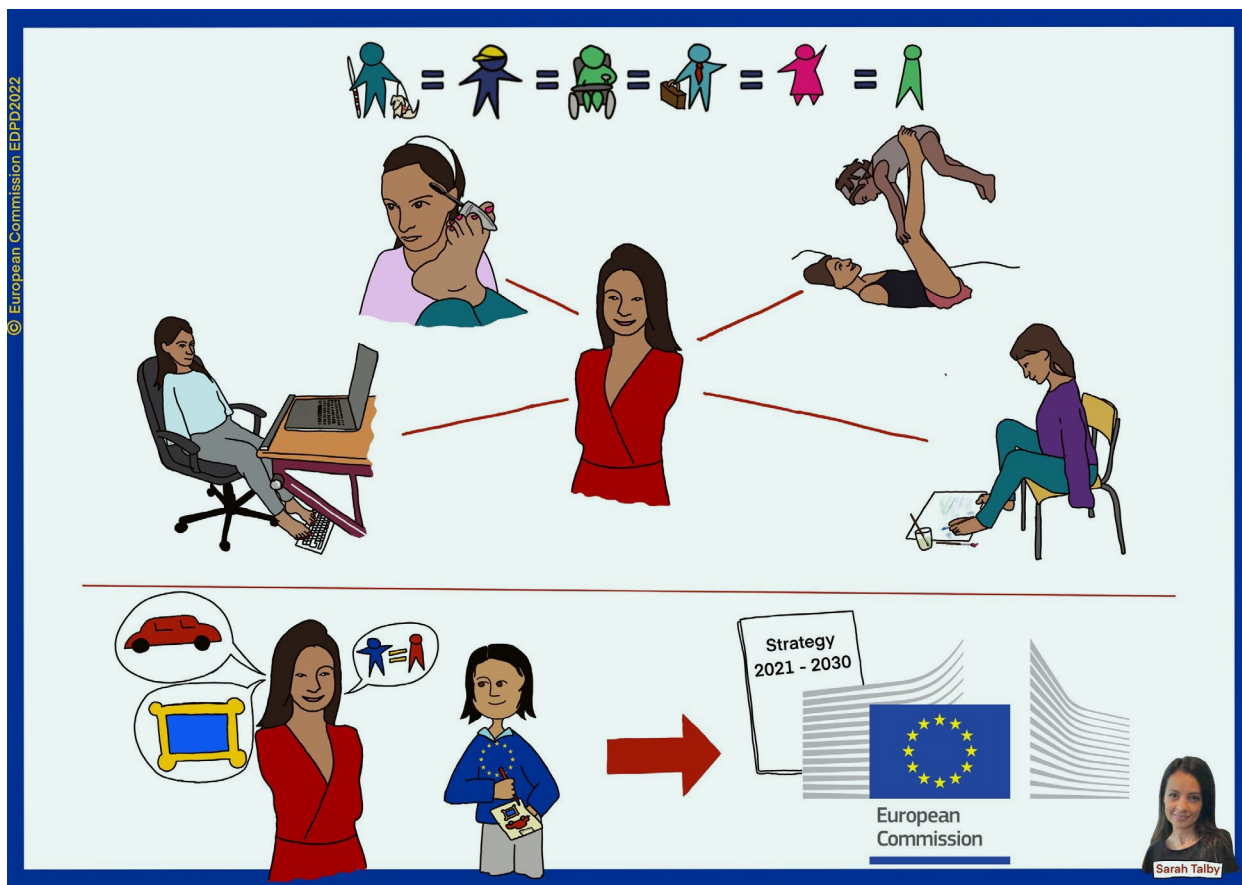
For **Tamara Byrne**, a self-advocate from Ireland who is active in Inclusive Ireland, school was a positive and inclusive experience thanks to support from friends, special needs assistants and teachers. However, when she left school, her time in day care left her feeling depressed and anxious about her future. Her university studies on Mediaeval History and Media encouraged her choice of direction in life.

Producing and presenting her own **radio show** during her time in college and producing a show for a local radio after college were key periods in her life. She underlined how important it is for persons with disabilities to talk at events and to talk to the media.

She highlighted the support that she received from her family and the **freedom she has to make her own choices**. Financially, she only receives a limited amount of money from the government as she does not have many opportunities to get a paid job, a situation which makes her financially dependent on her family. In that context, she said that it would be helpful if she could hire her own support person and not have to always rely on her family.

“Persons with disabilities need support in life, information should be put in a way that is easy to understand and persons with disabilities should have equal rights in the law and have the right to vote.”

Tamara Byrne, EDF Youth Committee and self-advocate and active in Inclusive Ireland



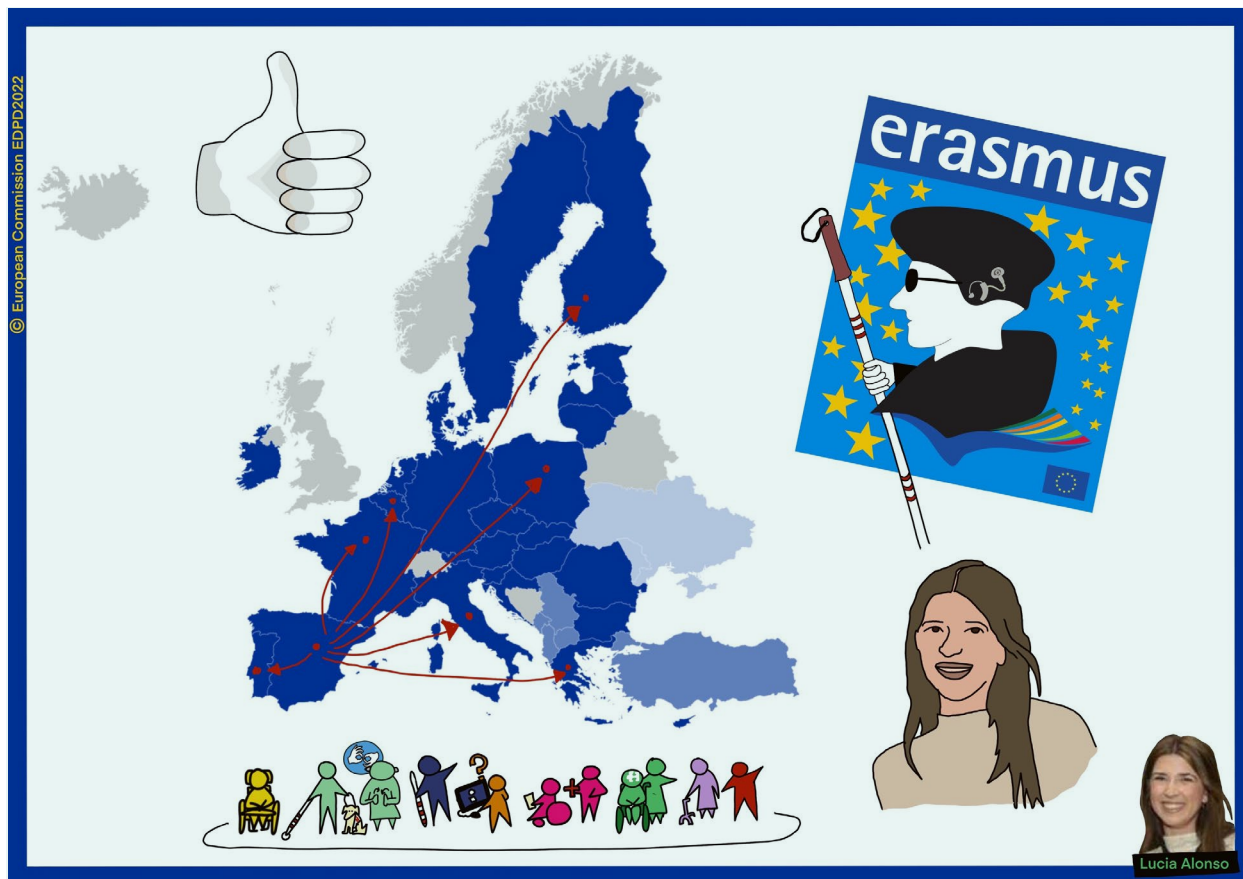
For **Sarah Talbi**, being born with a disability is “an invitation to experience human life in a different way”. As a woman, artist, and content creator, she faces challenges on a daily basis. She creates video content on social networks about her life without upper limbs to raise awareness about living with a physical disability.

Discovering her artistic skills, such as drawing and painting, has given her joy and the chance to meet new people. However, she found out how persons with disabilities also face **discrimination in the artistic world** when a teacher refused to teach her because she was drawing with her feet. Her response was to turn to another structure and find another teacher. As she pointed out, “when we [persons with disabilities] face discrimination by one person, we should not stop”, adding that “I think that, as persons with a disability, we are free to make personal choices”.

She also pointed out that **digital harassment** is a problem for all of us and even more so for persons with disabilities. Whilst she has more than 500,000 subscribers to her content and many of those are “wonderful people”, she still faces unpleasant comments.

“Violence towards persons with disabilities is still prevalent in our society. This is why I am very happy to be here with you today. I would really like to thank the European Commission for giving me this opportunity. I hope we can work together, collaborate. And once again, let me just say, it is not a privilege to be here. It is indeed a right. Thank you very much.”

Sarah Talbi, Belgian national champion of the European Commission’s communication campaign ‘Together for Rights’



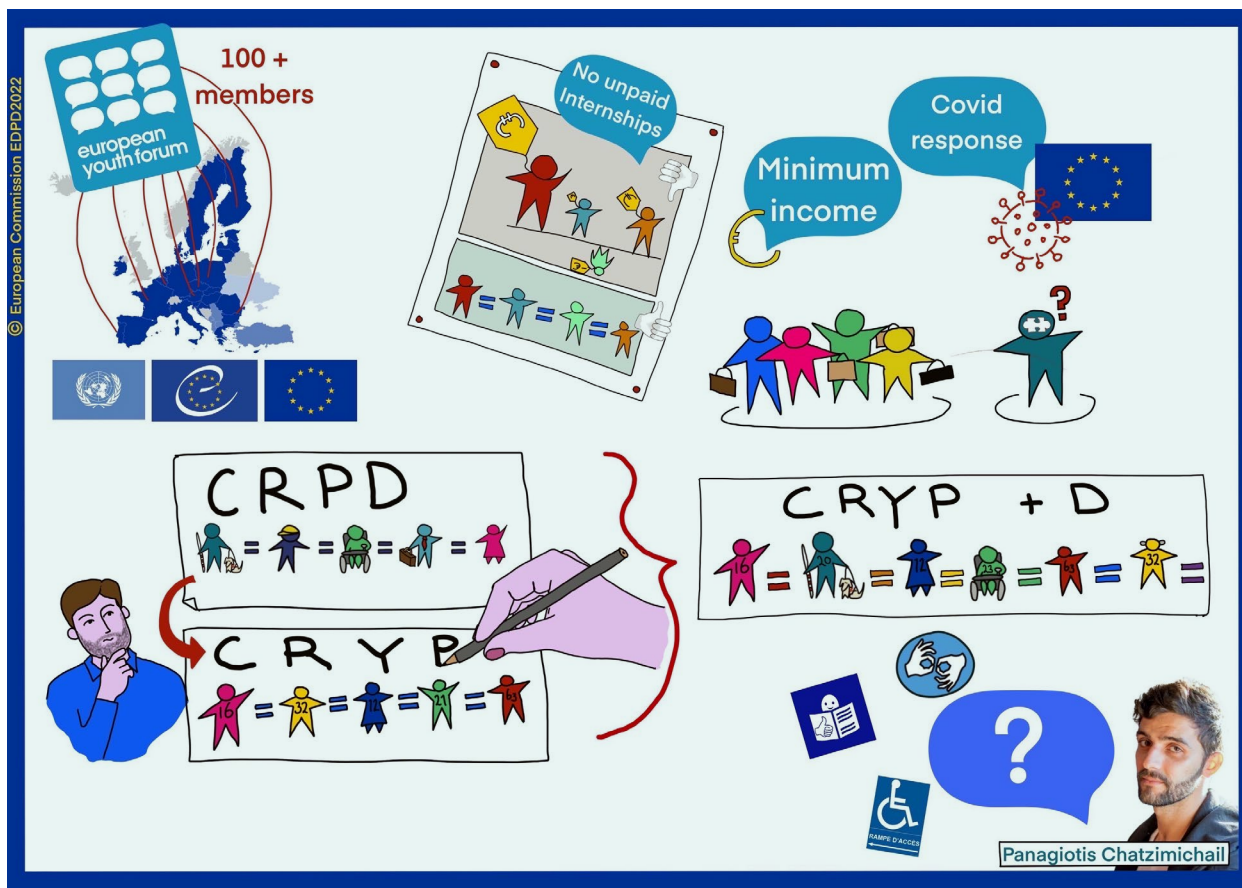
Lucia Alonso is a 23-year-old young woman who is finishing a bachelor’s degree in Nursing. She is hearing impaired with two cochlear implants and was diagnosed with visual impairment in 2022. She went to an inclusive school and had the opportunity to take part in the Erasmus programme.

Lucia stated that she and other students who went on Erasmus, went beyond their comfort zones. They met other young persons with disabilities in other countries and learnt to share different cultures. This was a gratifying experience for her.

She and others were open to and interested in living these different Erasmus-type experiences, overcoming barriers and borders. Her pioneering experience shows how persons with disabilities can fully benefit from Erasmus. She explained how, more and more persons with disabilities are now taking up this opportunity to go abroad as part of their professional training and stressed how important this is.

“Celebrating the International Day of Disabilities together is a great way to honour those persons with disabilities who can go beyond their comfort zone and their borders. Erasmus and other programmes help us share the richness of cultures across borders.”

Lucia Alonso, Erasmus + beneficiary



Panagiotis Chatzimichail, Board member of the European Youth Forum,² explained that the Forum has been analysing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as part of a position paper that it is drafting that investigates gaps in international human rights laws. The aim here is to ensure that any intersecting issues that impact young people are covered and to include any issues that are not covered in law. The EYF has also contributed to a shadow report coordinated by the European Disability Forum in order to advocate for better legal protection for young persons with disabilities.

Looking ahead, the European Youth Forum is aiming to be intersectional in its work, including seeking to better incorporate the EU's Disability Strategy and human rights for young persons with disabilities in its work. It also wants to be truly inclusive in how it organises events and in its own organisation as part of the secretariat and leadership structures.

"It is a personal dream to be able to have the policy papers in easy-to-read format. This is where I welcome the EU to provide funding and training so we can incorporate it in our work."

Panagiotis Chatzimichail, Board member of the European Youth Forum

² The European Youth Forum, a network representing over 100 youth organisations across Europe, seeks to advance the human rights of young people and engages in direct advocacy, e.g., at the UN, EU and the Council of Europe.

Access to education, access to employment and accessibility were all raised as important issues during the discussion.

The importance of assisting students with disabilities to progress through college was noted. In that context, the focus should be on the educational institutions providing the necessary support to students; not relying on friends and family; and not relying only on the efforts of students with disabilities.

There was a recommendation (especially for those living in remote areas and those not able to access traditional means of education) to make use of digital tools, allowing persons with disabilities to **access education via the internet** with online teachers and professors.

There was also a plea to make it easier for young persons with disabilities to fully participate in **Erasmus**. In that context, the European Commission and Erasmus programmes need to take into account the different needs of students participating, facilitating transport, communication and stays in the different countries hosting them.

The need to support young persons with disabilities when **facing a transition** (e.g., from school to university or from school to a job) was also underlined. In that context, supporting mental health of young persons with disabilities, and even peer-learning from others who have experienced a transition would be key. Acknowledging these transitions and the support that is needed (e.g., access to information, funding etc.) plus knowledge transfer between civil society organisations and public authorities are also important.

With regard to **internships**, it was argued that, even when they are paid, with a right to personal assistance in every sphere, the right to additional costs for transport and everything else to do with supporting the person in their post should not be the responsibility of the person with the disability.

With regard to **job applications**, it was highlighted that persons with disabilities find it difficult to decide when to share the information about their disability. A suggestion was made to work with employers on overcoming obstacles in terms of how open they are to work with young persons with disabilities. To achieve that, bringing stakeholders together is also key.

Furthermore, the importance of ensuring **universal accessibility** was highlighted, as well as ensuring sufficient funding for this. To achieve this, identifying the specific accessibility requirements of persons with different disabilities is key. There was a suggestion for the European Commission to provide funding for accessibility and/or personal assistance as part of the EU funding for events. As a crosscutting subject, the importance of having a **gender perspective in education policies** was stressed. In that context, the European Youth Forum noted how important it is that women's experiences and stories are shared.

SESSION 2: GLOBAL INSTRUMENTS TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Speakers:

Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion, European Commission

Gerard Quinn, UN Special Rapporteur on Disability

Jorge Araya, Secretariat of the UNCRPD Committee

Marine Uldry, Senior Human Rights Officer, European Disability Forum

Patricia Ötvös, Adviser, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe

Giuseppe Palmisano, General Rapporteur and former President of the European Committee of Social Rights, Council of Europe

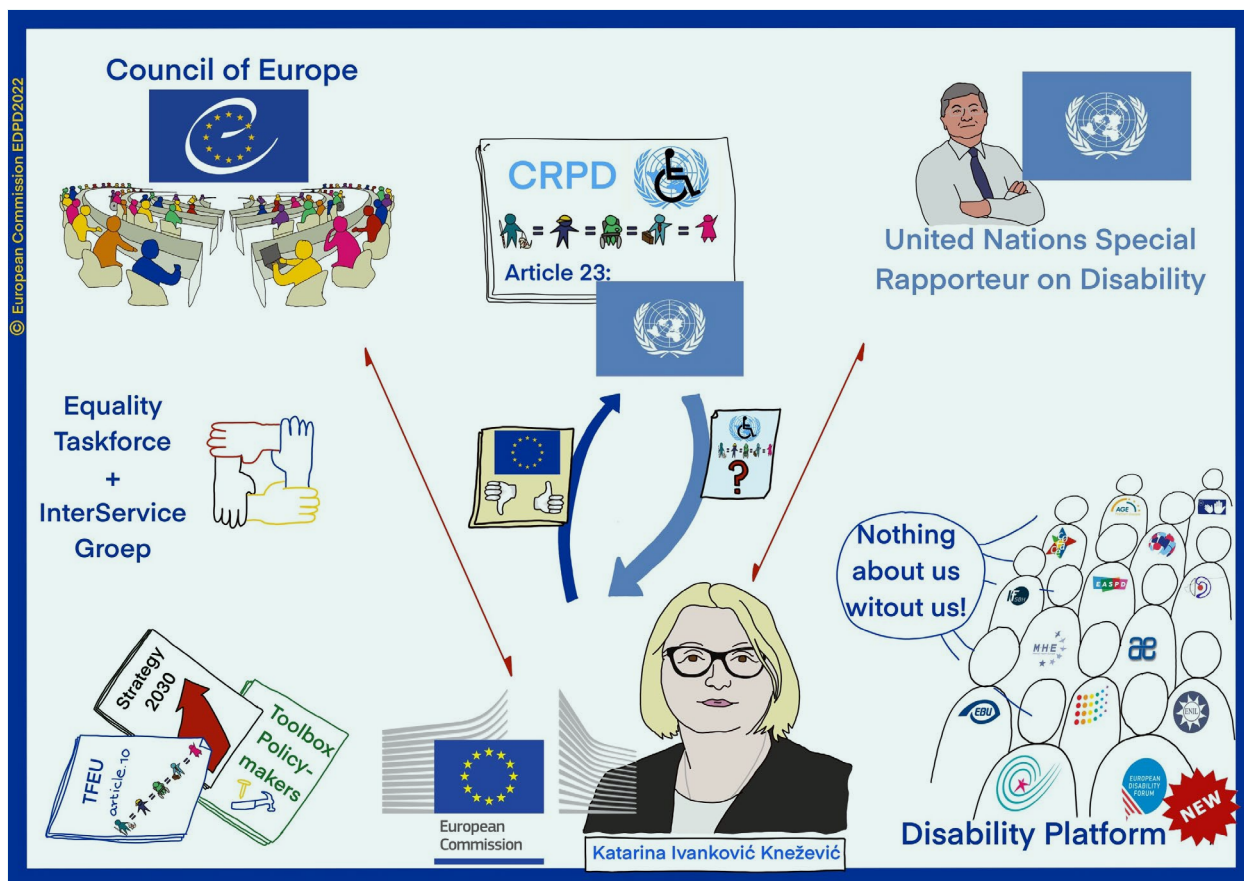
Moderator: Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, Senior Expert in Disability and Inclusion, DG EMPL, European Commission



Inmaculada Placencia Porrero stated that this session was key to shine a light on how the CRPD and the Council of Council of Europe instruments are working to address the rights of persons with disabilities; how we work with civil society and the efforts of the Commission in order to implement these rights.

In a show of hands at the beginning of the session, the majority of participants indicated that life is better for persons with disabilities after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).





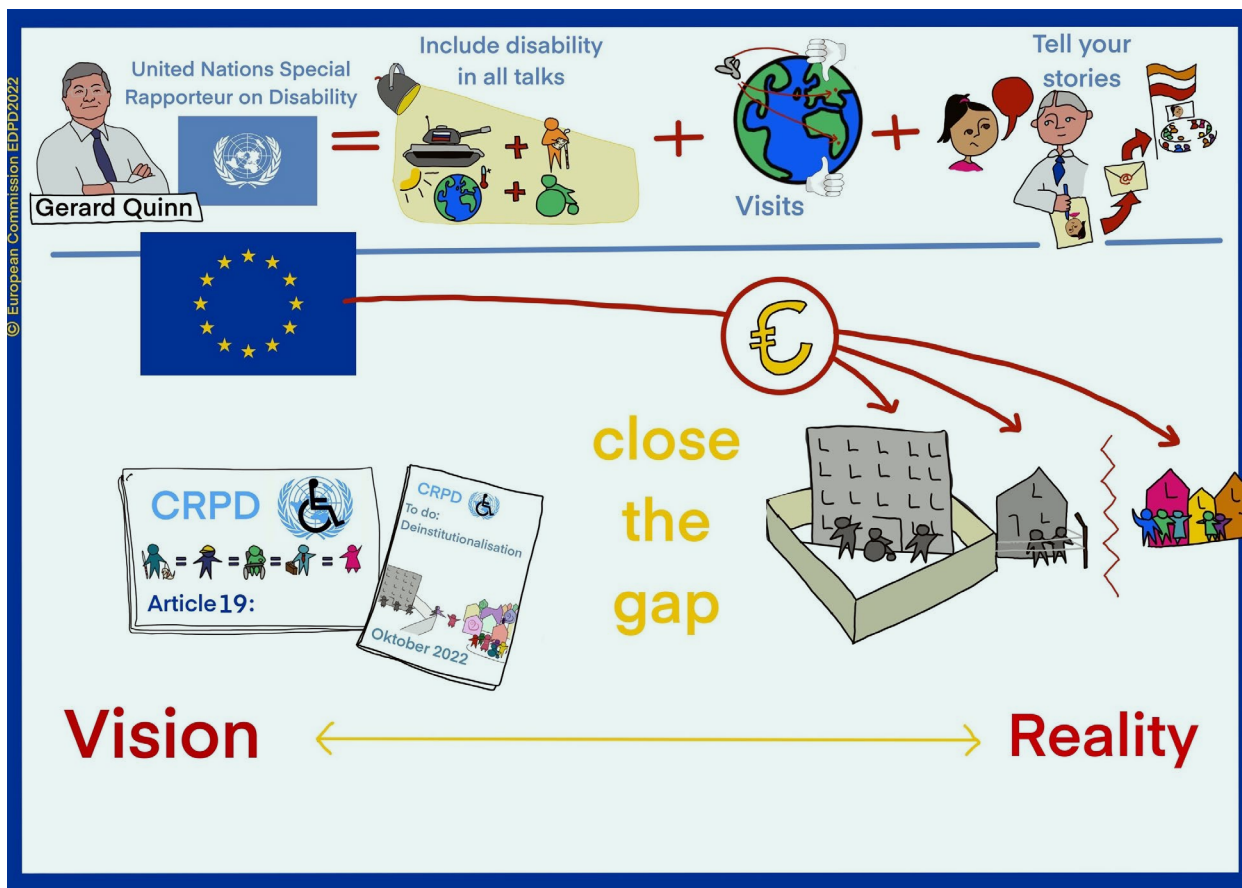
With regard to the UNCRPD, **Katarina Ivanković Knežević**, Social Rights and Inclusion Director, DG Employment, European Commission, explained that the Commission is preparing **responses to a list of issues** to the EU (from the UN Convention Committee) about different articles. It will then send its report on the Convention, by April, to the UN Committee.

The tools used by the EU to implement the UN Convention include the [EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(2021-2030\)](#) and better regulation tools, which help make EU instruments 'disability-inclusive' and ensure consistency across the different policies.

There is also a **Task Force on equality** (an equality coordinator from each EU institution looks after mainstreaming equality); each institution has a disability coordinator; plus there is an European Commission Inter-service Group on Disability (to discuss future initiatives and implementation of the strategy), a Disability Platform³ (including Member State representatives as focal points for the UNCRPD, civil society organisations etc.) and working groups for initiatives from the EU Strategy (so far, subgroups for the Employment Disability Package, the European Disability Card and the AccessibleEU resource centre).

She underlined the importance of disability mainstreaming and of consulting organisations of persons with disabilities to help ensure effective policymaking.

³ Register of Commission expert groups and other similar entities (europa.eu)



Gerard Quinn, UN Special Rapporteur on Disability, explained that core functions of his role are to shine a light on topics that might not otherwise see the light of day, to bring them to the attention of the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and to help countries make progress via country visits. He can propose a visit even if the country has not ratified the UNCRPD. A third action is to receive complaints and relay them to governments, with the aim being to broker solutions.

A key conclusion following his **visit to the EU in March 2022**, was that the disability rights agenda is no longer hidden in a corner within the EU institutions. Exponents across many services are all motivated to find solutions and there is a broad level of ownership, which is key to sustainable change. He was particularly impressed with the EU High Representative for Human Rights and noted that the overall trajectory is positive.

His view is that it is fitting for the **EU to take more of a leadership role** (e.g., in relation to the UNCRPD) in global and regional debates. He called for a more intentional form of coordination between the different EU institutions. Internal staff rules and regulations and certain recruitment practices were among policy domains where improvements could be made.



With regard to the UNCRPD process, **Jorge Araya**, Secretariat of the UNCRPD Committee explained that countries and organisations submit reports about the rights of persons with disabilities as per the UN Convention. Discussions are held on what is going well, challenges and how the UNCRPD Committee can help. The UNCRPD Committee then writes guidelines to clarify and support change.

The EU was examined by the UNCRPD Committee in 2015 after the submission of the **first EU report**. In 2022, the UN Committee adopted a communication containing a set of issues. After receiving the Commission's replies in April 2023, it will schedule a dialogue, probably in 2024. In the coming months, civil society organisations (CSOs) can submit alternative reports to the Committee.

In August 2022, the Committee called for dialogue with several EU Member States and the EU to follow up on the situation of persons with disabilities in **Ukraine** following the Russian attacks on the country.

With regard to the **Optional Protocol**, the Committee conducts investigations into systematic violations in States that have ratified it (the EU is not yet a party to it). It has adopted reports on these investigations, which have been shared with the EU (important especially as the EU has structural funds invested in these EU countries).

In terms of standard setting, the Committee has issued guidelines on **deinstitutionalisation** (including in humanitarian emergencies), providing guidance to State parties on the deinstitutionalisation process. Such guidelines can drive a process for the preparation of guidelines at the EU level.



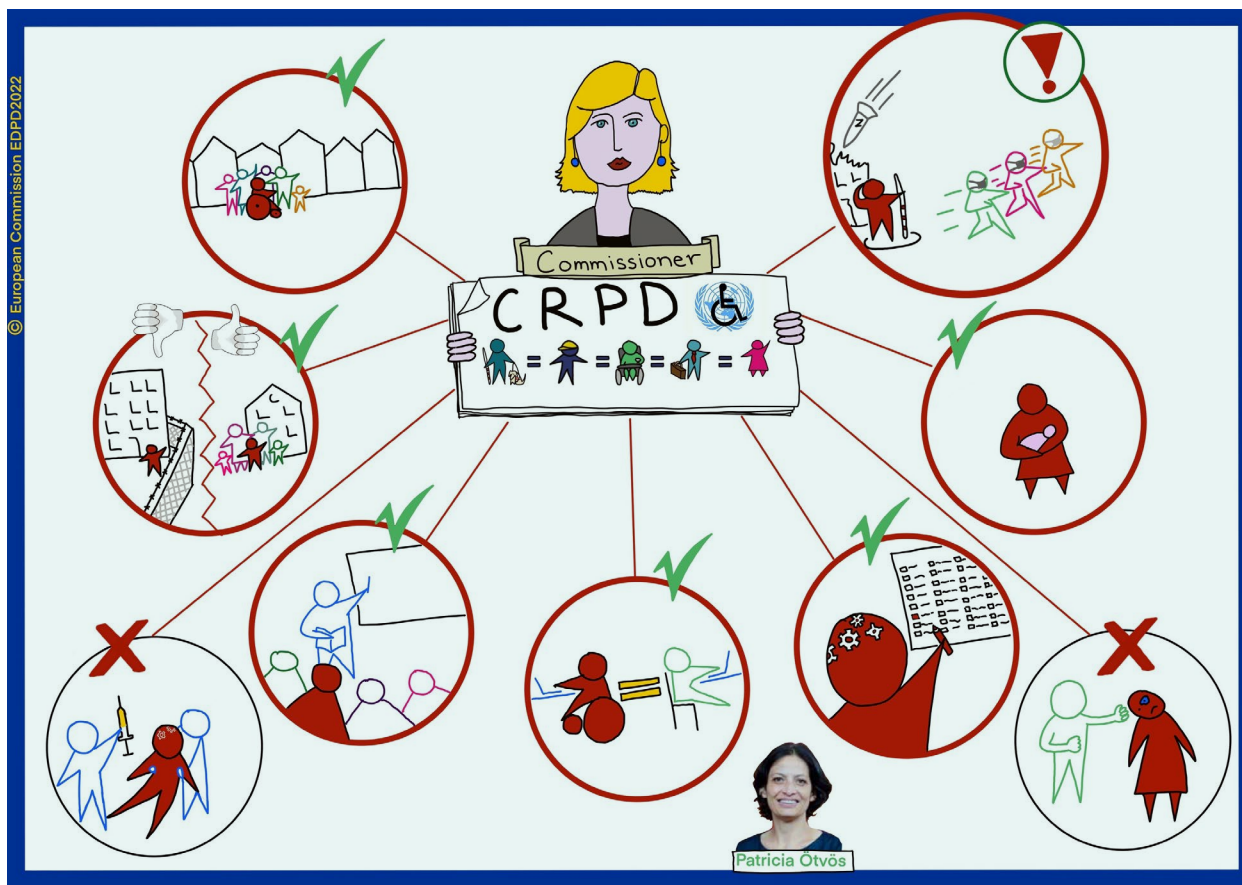
According to **Marine Uldry**, Senior Human Rights Officer, European Disability Forum (EDF), EDF uses global instruments - e.g., the UN Convention, the UN Special Rapporteur's work and guidance from the UNCRPD Committee - to advocate the rights of persons with disabilities.

In terms of the EU review, EDF has prepared **alternative reports**, which look at the challenges and the remaining problems, and sent them to the UNCRPD Committee. The four reports take the form of one on all the articles of the UN Convention, a joint briefing on equality and intersectionality, a report on what the EU is doing outside Europe and a contribution to a joint submission within the UNCRPD monitoring framework. Several members of EDF have also published their own alternative reports.

The reports covered **17 main concerns** (in the report's executive summary), including:

- The EU to verify that all its laws and policies respect the Convention.
- Problems of implementation and enforcement of EU law.
- Persons with disabilities and organisations are not always meaningfully involved and consulted on all issues concerning them.
- The lack of protection against discrimination and issues of inaccessibility (e.g., to events).
- Issues related to a lack of data collection.

The reports also cover **key topics**, such as: violence, access to justice, freedom of movement, the use of EU money, independent living, access to healthcare, the impact of Covid-19 on persons with disabilities, climate action, the role of the EU in external action and international cooperation.



Patricia Ötvös, Adviser, Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, explained that the Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent Council of Europe institution that promotes awareness and respect for human rights in the member states. There are 60 member states, including all 27 EU Member States.

It is not a complaint mechanism, but the Commissioner has received communications with important information from individuals, NGOs, and activists. The current Commissioner, Dunja Mijatović, started in 2018 and has worked extensively on the human rights of persons with disabilities, focussing on promoting the standards of the UN Convention.

Examples of where the Commissioner has **promoted UN Convention standards**:

- Her opposition to the drafting of a protocol to the Oviedo Convention (relating to how persons with disabilities in hospitals are treated).
- The Commissioner has asked member states to put an end to involuntary placements in institutions and to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to community-based services.
- She has also called on states to end the practice of children with disabilities being isolated in institutions and to ensure that they are raised in families and that all measures are taken that are in the best interests of the children.
- She has asked member states to include the consultation of persons with disabilities in relation to the response to crisis situations such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine.



Giuseppe Palmisano, General Rapporteur and former President of the European Committee of Social Rights, Council of Europe, noted that the European Social Charter, especially Article 15, gives protection to persons with disabilities in terms of their rights. Article 15, which is about requiring the social integration and inclusion of persons with disabilities, now also covers issues such as education, access to employment, working conditions, overcoming barriers to communication and mobility, access to transport and housing etc.

The European Committee of Social Rights works on collective complaint procedures, including some that have led to key court decisions. In one case, between Autism Europe and France, the ruling was that France had failed to fulfil its educational obligations to persons with autism on the grounds that the proportion of children with autism being educated in either generalist or specialist schools was much lower than for other children, disabled or not, and that there was a chronic shortage of care and support facilities for them.

He concluded by saying that the Charter system has proven to be an important point of reference in the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities at the European level and that the system should play a role in better shaping and reinforcing EU commitments in the field of disabilities.

DISCUSSION: GLOBAL INSTRUMENTS TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

It was noted that persons with a non-visible disability should not be left behind. In that context, there is never enough advocacy and information sharing about invisible disabilities. Furthermore, the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability recommends that the EU matches EU Member States by providing **official recognition of national sign languages at the EU level**. The European Commission is seeking to find the right balance (in terms of international/national sign languages) and is working with DG Translation and Interpretation to find solutions.

With regard to the **cost-of-living crisis**, it was noted that States need to properly devise budgets for human rights and allocate sufficient resources for the necessary support. In terms of urgent remedies, the UNCRPD addresses emergency situations in its standards, thereby offering Member States appropriate solutions.

It was noted that there is no specific **European disability ombudsman** and that the EU's general ombudsman deals with all kinds of possible discrimination, including disability.

With regard to Artificial Intelligence (AI), e.g., in medical health, and how it affects the rights of persons with disabilities, it was underlined how important it is for governments to have knowledge on the balance between risks and opportunities. Among the risks is that machine learning will make decisions by short-circuiting the obligation of reasonable accommodation. A recommendation by the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Unboxing AI, 10 steps to protect human rights', provides EU Member States with ideas and guidance to maximise the potential of AI and to mitigate the negative impact on peoples' rights, including persons with disabilities.

SESSION 3: VIOLENCE AGAINST PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Speakers:

Bianca Faragau, *European Commission, Gender equality Unit, DG JUST*

Claudia Mahler, *Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons*

Sabine Coppens, *Coordinator Alles over Pesten*

Yevheniya Pavlova, *Member of the Ukrainian National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities*

Moderator: Gunta Anca, *Vice President of the European Disability Forum*

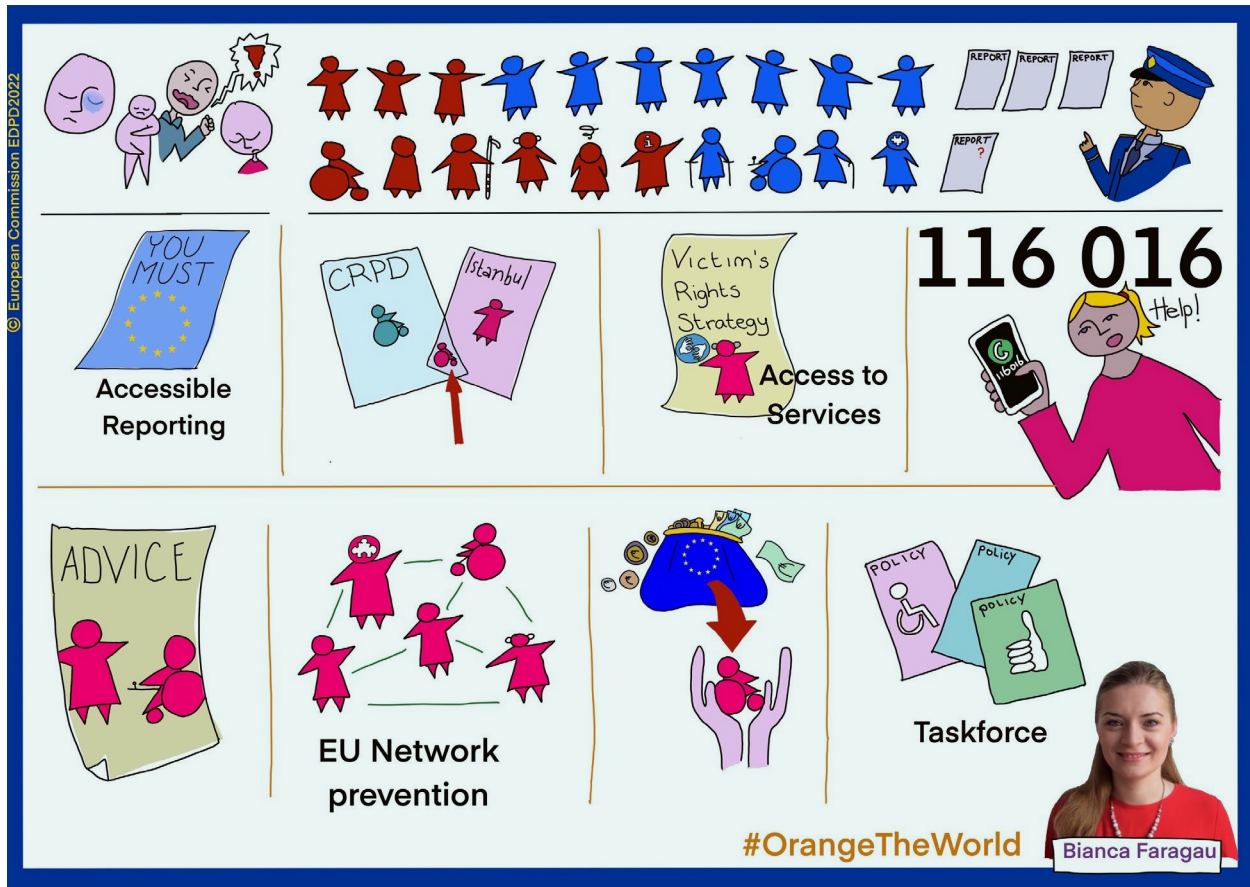


Gunta Anca introduced the session highlighting the multidimensional perspective of violence against persons with disabilities. This was the reason why the session was focusing on different types of violence, such as gender-based violence, violence against older persons living in institutions and bullying at school.

Moreover, due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, violence against persons with disabilities in Ukraine was also a topic.



Gender-based violence



Bianca Faragau, expert on gender equality in DG JUST noted that this conference was taking place on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Among its upcoming actions, the Commission is due to table a proposal for a **Directive on violence against women and domestic violence** and is setting up a common EU number for helplines for victims of violence against women (116016), to be operational in the second half of 2023.

The statistics stated that:

- One in six persons with disabilities have experienced physical violence (doubling the figure for persons without disabilities).
- One in two persons with disabilities have experienced harassment (e.g., hate crime, psychological violence or abuse).
- Women with disabilities are at higher risk, with one in three of them facing physical violence during their lifetime. Moreover, one in two face psychological violence from their partner.

In addition to the [EU's Gender Equality Strategy 2022 to 2025](#), the Commission is due next year to table a proposal for a Directive on violence against women and domestic violence, including binding EU rules to address this violence online and offline. Aims include criminalising the most severe forms of violence (e.g., rape, lack of consent, cyber harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, genital mutilation). EU Member States will be called on to take measures to **facilitate the needs of women with disabilities** (e.g., easy, and accessible reporting procedures and helplines to accommodate their needs). The Directive is along the lines of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention, which the EU is in the process of acceding to.

Actions at the EU level include the establishment of a new EU network to exchange good practice about how to prevent gender-based violence and domestic violence. The Commission is also setting up a **common EU number**

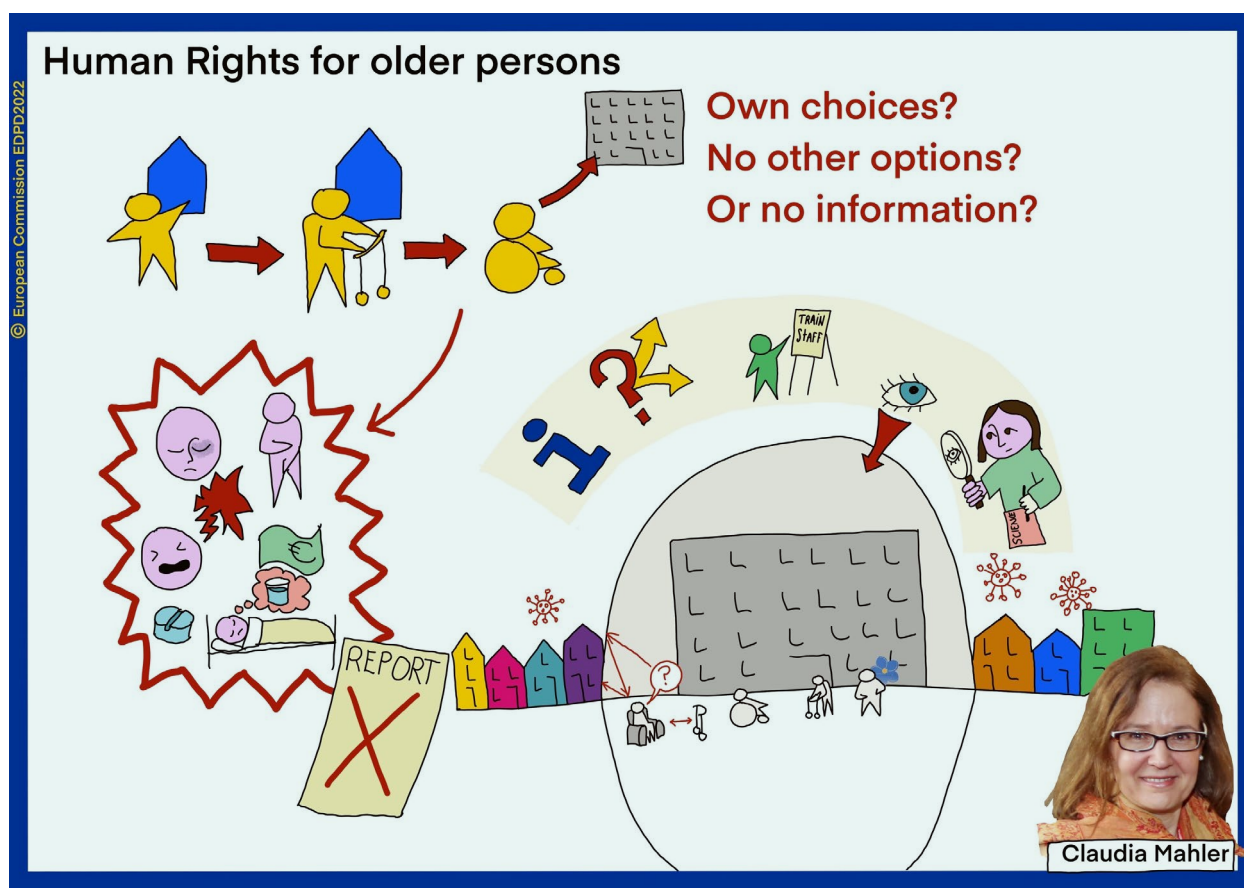
for helplines for victims of violence against women (116016), to be operational in the second half of 2023. MSs will connect existing helplines at the national level to this number.

Improving the accessibility of the helpline (e.g., with speech to text for the hard of hearing) will depend on the national helpline behind the common EU number. A key element in a proposal for a Directive to combat violence against women is how to make things more accessible (e.g., reporting, helplines, support services). When the Directive has been adopted, all EU Member States will have to have national helplines accessible for all vulnerable groups, including the hard of hearing. There will be guidelines for this.

"We won't stop until everyone with disabilities is protected from violence. Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. We can stand in solidarity with victims and survivors. We can raise awareness. Let's orange the world."

Bianca Faragau, European Commission, Gender equality, DG JUST

Older persons living in institutions



Key in this debate is [Article 3.1](#) (General principles) of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: "Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons"

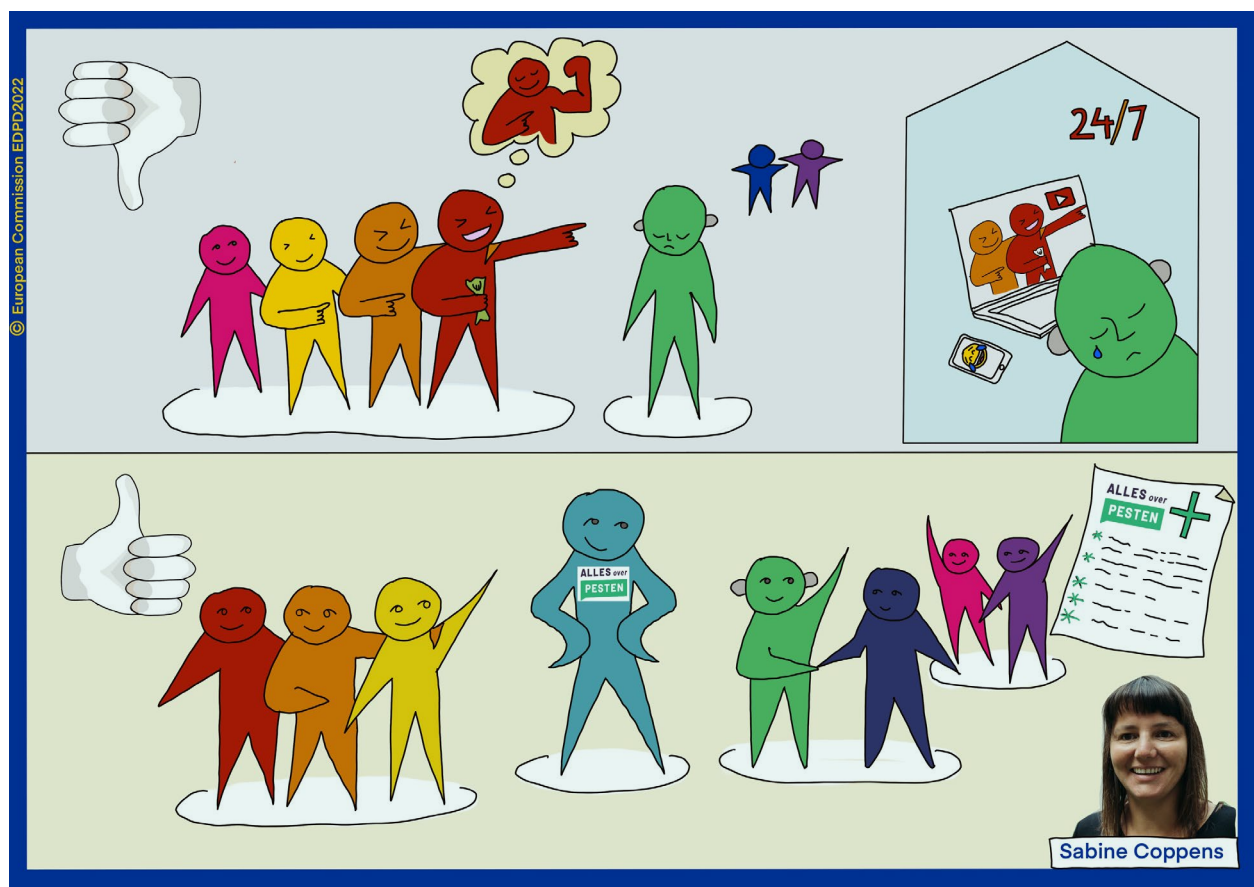
Claudia Mahler, Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, explained that retirement homes and institutions are not yet suitable for older persons, with cases of neglect or lack of necessary care and unnecessary limitations of their freedom (e.g., older persons strapped to their beds or chairs or a deep armchair that a person cannot get out of independently).

EU Member States have the task to ensure that older persons are **sufficiently informed** to fully understand the options available and then **be empowered to take their own decisions**. This information must be provided in an accessible and easy to understand format. Only then can consent be assumed.

She called for sufficient training for staff and campaigns to raise awareness about this issue. Another recommendation was to have a **monitoring system and more scientific studies** to gain a clear picture of the situation. It is also important for there to be clearly defined quality measures for care institutions. And there is a need for an independent body where individuals/victims/concerned family/members of staff can report the incidents.

There was discussion about **how to define old age**. It was pointed out that defining old age is not easy and that the current working assumption in the EU, which is that an older person is a person who has retired, is insufficient.

Bullying in schools



Bullying takes place in many places and situations (e.g., schools, sports clubs). Moreover, through online bullying, known as cyberbullying, there is no physical and timing limits, so children can face bullying all-day long. According to **Sabine Coppens**, Coordinator for the Alles over Pesten campaign, bullying tends to happen in a negative group in which bystanders make it difficult to prevent/stop and even encourage it by keeping silent or laughing at the bullying.

Alles over Pesten was created in 2004 in Belgium as an anti-bullying plan focused on schools. The particular approach in its campaign has been to focus on and promote the power of a positive group, in which people do not stay silent nor remain neutral nor accept the bullying behaviour, but speak out against it, where everyone is allowed and where differences are allowed.

There are now 22 organisations who regularly meet and have material, coaching and other tools to help organisations prevent and stop bullying.

Violence against persons with disabilities in Ukraine and those fleeing Ukraine



The **Ukrainian National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities** brings together more than 120 regional and local NGOs for persons with disabilities across the country. According to Yevheniya Pavlova, its activities include working to develop and advocate amendments to laws relating to procedures for border crossing by persons with disabilities, monitoring the state of persons with disabilities during the war and cooperating with national and international institutions acting for the rights of persons with disabilities.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, it has been providing lifesaving activities and **humanitarian assistance** (e.g., medicine, first aid, food, and non-food items as well as logistical and moral support). Yevheniya Pavlova stated how much support is still needed given the hugely difficult situation.

Organisations of persons with disabilities are facing huge challenges on a daily basis. Examples include those in a wheelchair not being able to escape explosions, blind persons not seeing and stepping on a landmine and deaf persons not hearing an air raid. Persons with disabilities also face violence and rape, food deprivation and problems such as meeting basic needs for water and health. Other major challenges include housing and the lack of medicine. Special focus is put on the lack of gas and power, and how it severely affects some persons with disabilities.

“On the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, we need solidarity and encouragement. We need to join forces to protect the rights of persons with disabilities to prevent violations and to stop hostilities.”

Yevheniya Pavlova, Member of the Ukrainian National Assembly of Persons with Disabilities

CONCLUSIONS

Speakers:

John Patrick Clarke, *Vice President of the European Disability Forum*
Camilla Waltherson Grönvall, *Minister of Social Affairs, Sweden*
Alison Crabb, *Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit, European Commission*



Given the pandemic, the current crisis in Ukraine and the cost-of-living crisis, **John Patrick Clarke**, Vice President of the European Disability Forum, described it as no small feat that the European disability movement is still around, vibrant and remains united. Every day should be a day to work towards an accessible society, inclusive education, a just judicial system, and a day to advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

He stressed the importance of hearing about the **reality of young Europeans with disabilities** and noted that the European Disability Forum plans to find ways to listen better to young persons. He also highlighted the importance of joining forces to eliminate hate and harassment in general (especially online and towards persons with disabilities) and, on the International Day of the Elimination of Violence, the importance of hearing examples of the violence that persons with disabilities are exposed to (e.g., against women and girls, older persons in institutions and during the war in Ukraine).

In the light of the upcoming EU proposal for a **European Disability Card**, it is important that everyone contributes to the Commission's consultation.

"There is a call for the evidence on the disability card. We must bring all our evidence into this process. I remind you, for every EU measure we need to campaign in our own countries and in the capital and the European Disability Forum is here to collaborate with you in all your efforts."

John Patrick Clarke, Vice President of the European Disability Forum



Sweden's Minister of Social Affairs **Camilla Waltherson Grönvall** noted that, during the Swedish Presidency of the EU, the government wants to support the implementation of the UNCRPD by promoting the EU's Disability Strategy and by highlighting national strategies and actions from EU Member States for mutual learning.

The Swedish agency for participation, an expert agency that promotes the implementation of disability policy, will therefore organise a **seminar together with the European Commission** and in dialogue with other relevant stakeholders. The seminar, which aims to highlight the EU strategy and its implementation, will be organised in connection with one of the meetings of the Disability Platform in Brussels. In addition, the Swedish Disability Rights Federation has been granted funding to organise a seminar together with the European Disability Forum, which will also highlight the EU strategy.

"As president of the Council of European Union, we want to support the effective implementation of the convention by promoting the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [...] Our ambition is to do our best to integrate a disability rights perspective in our work during the Presidency."

Camilla Waltherson Grönvall, Sweden's Minister of Social Affairs



Alison Crabb, Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit, European Commission, said that in this, the European Year of Youth, the focus on the voice and needs of young persons with disabilities, including hearing about their powerful lived experience, had been striking.

Next year, the **European Year of Skills**, will be key in tailoring learning solutions and ensuring access to learning tailored to the diverse needs of persons with disabilities. EU Member States have been invited, in the EU Strategy of Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to declare national targets for participation in learning by adults with disabilities.

With the EU being a party to the UNCRPD, the Commission has a role to play in facilitating discussion with other regional bodies on their work around the UNCRPD and in supporting them to **turn the obligations in the UNCRPD into reality**.

In 2023, two headlines of the Strategy will be on the table: **European level guidance on independent living and a Commission proposal for a European Disability Card**. In addition to the call for evidence, other opportunities for organisations to send in proposals/ideas are the public consultation and survey in early 2023.

“Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market. This right is provided for in the very first principle of the European Pillar for Social Rights, and we must work together to make it a reality for persons with a disability.”

Alison Crabb, Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit, European Commission



ACCESS CITY AWARD

"We all have our "dream city" where we would like to live. A city that offers all the services needed to live life to its fullest, while enjoying a great quality of life. For many people, this "dream city" can only come true if the city in question is accessible. That is why I am a fan of the Access City Award."

Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency



The Conference ended with the ceremony for the **2023 Access City Award**, which recognises and celebrates cities' actions to become more accessible to persons with disabilities. European Vice-President for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová, Commissioner for Equality, Helena Dalli, the European Disability Forum President, Ioannis Vardakastanis, and the mayors of the winning cities, were among those attending.

Some 87 million persons in the EU who have a form of disability and, with Europe being mainly an urban society, guaranteeing equal rights and improving the **quality of life in cities is a responsibility for society** as a whole.

There were **43 applications from cities in this 13th edition**, with these being shortlisted by an EU jury to six finalists. All serve as examples for other cities. Of those six, three cities were awarded first, second and third place, with three others being awarded with Special Mentions.

Accessible transport, easy-to-read information, pictograms, tactile paths, dropped kerbs and ramps, venues with hearing loop systems and clear sound and accessible websites and communication kiosks are examples of accessible features that **unlock cities** and historical areas for many persons with disabilities.

Last year's winning city was Luxembourg. Its initiatives included the creation of an integration and special needs department, ensuring accessibility at events, the implementation of special arrangements for hearing impaired persons, the introduction of low floor buses and the installation of sound signals at traffic lights.



ACA 2023 Special Mentions:

Special mention for built environment: Hamburg (Germany)

Hamburg has, among other things, its own disability equality act, helping authorities to remove daily barriers for persons with disabilities and a highly accessible port area.

Ioannis Vardakastanis, the President of the European Disability Forum, awarded the prize to Hamburg. In his speech, he described the EU's standard on the accessibility and usability of built environment, which was adopted last year, as "a very important tool that has to be used by authorities and professionals" and called on authorities, architects, building companies and urban planners to make use of it.

"A barrier in a school building prevents children with disabilities from being included in a school in their neighbourhood. The same applies to any infrastructure in the city,"

Ioannis Vardakastanis, the President of the European Disability Forum

Special mention for transport: Grenoble (France)

Among other things, Grenoble has a strong approach to transport accessibility. Grenoble's public buses and trams have been made accessible and the city is currently working to provide adapted bicycles.

Alison CRABB, Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit in the European Commission awarded the prize to Grenoble. In her speech, she highlighted how accessibility in transport means an important key to unlock essential services that a city has to offer also for persons with disabilities.

"Accessibility in transport can even have implications for the fulfilment, or not, of their fundamental rights and participation in their communities."

Alison CRABB, Disability and Inclusion Head of Unit in the European Commission

Special mention for information and communication technologies (ICT): Mérida (Spain)

Among other things, Mérida has used ICT to enable persons with disabilities to communicate with city administration, to use public services and to participate on an equal basis with others and has produced easy-to-read versions of its communication materials.

Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, Senior Expert in Disability and Inclusion at the European Commission, awarded the prize to Mérida. In her speech, she stated that the increasing importance of the Information and Communication Technologies in our lives and society is obvious.

"Without accessible ICT, communicating with city administrations and using public services would not be possible for persons with disabilities on equal basis with others."

Inmaculada Placencia Porrero, Senior Expert in Disability and Inclusion at the European Commission

ACCESS CITY AWARD

ACA 2023 Winners:

Third prize: Ljubljana (Slovenia)

Initiatives included a big pedestrian area (including tactile pavements), accessible urban gardens, audible signals at traffic lights, parking spaces reserved for persons with disabilities, and a mobile app for information for persons in a wheelchair.

Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion in the European Commission, awarded the third prize to Ljubljana (Slovenia). In her speech, she stated that the winner cities are an example for others to strengthen their commitment to accessibility, as every year, more cities submit their applications for these awards. “This is the power of the Access City Awards”, she said.



“Ljubljana has understood that accessibility is a pre-requisite for the full participation of persons with disabilities in society.”

Katarina Ivanković Knežević, Director for Social Rights and Inclusion in the European Commission.

Second prize: Córdoba (Spain)

Initiatives included playgrounds using pictograms for children, an inclusive public transport network, a hearing loop system for the hard of hearing and bus drivers being trained to work with persons with disabilities.

Commissioner for Equality, **Helena Dalli**, awarded the second prize to Córdoba (Spain). In her speech, she stated that it is encouraging to see so many cities across Europe making such a concerted effort to become accessible. These cities are playing an essential role in ensuring that persons with disabilities can enjoy their rights and participate in their communities.



“In their commitment to break down barriers and deliver on accessibility, these cities are contributing to a Union of Equality while building a thriving and inclusive environment for all.”

Helena Dalli, the EU’s Commissioner for Equality.

First prize: Skellefteå (Sweden)



Among the initiatives were accessibility being included in all municipal plans, tactile information signs, ground heating to ensure that ice is not a barrier for persons with disabilities and others, tactile paths and fully accessible buses with low floors and ramps.

Finally, the European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency **Věra Jourová**, awarded the first prize to Skellefteå (Sweden). In her speech, she stated that as a former Minister of regional affairs and head of administration in the Czech Republic, she is aware of how difficult it may be to secure political support and funding for accessibility.

"I believe accessibility benefits everyone. The cities are more inclusive, more sustainable and offer a higher quality of life to all. A city that prioritises accessibility, making it easy and welcoming to live in, should be recognised and celebrated. Thank you to all the 43 cities that applied for your remarkable efforts to create communities without barriers. For me, you are all winners, and you all receive recognition today".

Věra Jourová, European Commission Vice-President for Values and Transparency

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