Antidiscrimination Policies, (Disability) Mainstreaming, and Intersectionality

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Introduction

Focusing on diversity, considered to be one of the most urgent challenges nowadays, social and political approaches usually assume that mutual respect and recognition of cultural patterns, identity models and life plans are indispensable for social development. At the same time, the European Social Protection Committee (SPC) points out that, even if a favorable evolution on the labor market can be observed, there is a “general continued deterioration in the relative poverty situation, its depth and persistence” (SPC 2016: 6). Given the high risk of poverty or social exclusion in all European member states the Committee underlines “that the inclusiveness and fairness of social protection systems is a key challenge across the EU” (SPC 2016: 7). The SPC report additionally highlights that privileged treatment, social discrimination, disempowerment and social inequality are increasing factors in European member states and Europe is thus asked to develop overarching conceptions of social justice which could provide a basis for policy development, social investment and the distribution of valued resources, goods and services.

Diversity and antidiscrimination policy approaches assume that societies are structured by various dimensions of difference like race, class and gender that influence to a high degree cultural value systems, social attributions, personal identity conceptions and associated senses of belonging. Following Fracer (1998: 2) most of the categories above are two-sided incorporating culture as well as power relations and economy. In this context, race, class and gender are frequently valued as the most important “axes of difference” (Klinger/Knapp 2007: 20). Seen as determining, interdependent factors of social inequality these social categories constitute the foundation of interlocking social patterns, social hierarchies and systems of domination. Associated with biographical experience, in various cultural contexts and social institutions, all of us are subjected to a “matrix of dominance” (Collins 2000), defined by structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal domains. Within this framework, ideas that de-
scribe what a “good” life and social equality might be are well established in society. Law, politics, religion and economy define social structures and contribute to power relations, legitimated by personal capacities, efficient work and social rationality. Indeed, differences between social groups are associated with specific, virtually stable power relations, which manifest themselves in specific organizational, intersubjective and representational forms (Yuval-Davis 2006: 198). The resulting consequences are institutionalized within mechanisms of social regulation and distribution with the effect that marginalized social groups are frequently confronted with unequal opportunities of living, with limited possibilities to represent their concerns and with restricted participation in social and political life. Especially given the current economic and demographic trends it is very important to recognize that not only race, class and gender but also other inequality dimensions are comparably important. Knapp (2008) underlines that social locations, power resources and life opportunities are determined by other distinguishing structural categories like age and health. Besides that, religion, sexual identity and dis/ability are the most often mentioned social categories that affect access to power and privileges, influence social relationships and shape people’s everyday experiences (Andersen 1996).

Even if all forms of oppression should be recognized as equally important, the degree of institutionalized representation and the ranking of political relevance vary widely between different social groups (Verloo 2006). Parallel to demographic change the political mainstream has also changed, which could be a reason why disability just now starts to achieve more policy attention and social relevance. Aiming to minimize personal and social risks related to disability, it is increasingly important to develop a set of political strategies that ensure equal rights, environmental accessibility, social protection and participation in society. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) sets out these concerns as central targets and has motivated governments worldwide to take the related requirements more seriously. European antidiscrimination laws show a raising awareness to reduce social inequalities grounded on disability and – to a limited extent – enable equal access to valued resources, goods and services. Critical voices, however, complain that there is a wide gap between political statements, legal requirements and the realization of social justice, protection, corporate responsibility and solidarity. Therefore, it might be time to go beyond rhetoric and reflect deeply rooted social power relationships like Ableism as well as anti-discrimination policies, mainstreaming and intersectional approaches,

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which promise concrete strategies, capable of providing equal rights to everyone.

Ableism

Self-actualization and personal development are central concerns in neoliberal discourses and practices – crucial for success, social progress and justice. It seems to be part of modern identity conceptions and social expectations to be efficient, flexible, mobile and self-determined. Even in everyday life, most of us imagine ourselves frequently as nearly invulnerable, well-appointed with abilities, without serious physical and mental burdens and largely free from impairments. Starting from such imaginations, Ableism points out that idealizations of human ability, invulnerability and perfection is an integral part of social power relations which clearly privilege people without disabilities. Realizing that we all live with bodies and minds that sometimes cause problems should remind us that we probably all face significant limitations of personal opportunities during our lifetime and “[...] need understandings of disability and handicap that do not support a paradigm of humanity as young and healthy” (Wendell 1996: 18). With that in mind, dis/ability concerns cannot be interpreted as special interests of a fringe group. Quite the contrary, they represent general social issues and should be recognized in their fundamental political relevance.

In many cases, medical approaches assume “that disabled people’s problems stem mainly or exclusively from their impairment” (Thomas in Waldschmidt 2005: 16). Therefore, minimizing the effects of an impairment, living “as normal as possible” and getting equal access to health and social services are often interpreted as the most important goals. In addition, disability is frequently associated with limited possibilities of personal development, defined as the unavoidable consequence of biology. Related impairment-effects might be interpreted as personal risk factors, but

[…] most of those problems can be traced to the social arrangements, to the human created structures and practices in which people live and their arrangements that are created with the majority of people without impairments in mind; they could be re-created, they should be re-created to make the world a more possible place for all its citizens. (Asch in Makkonen 2002: 5)

Perceptions of disability as a tragic stroke of fate and the following assumptions of individual deficits often are used to justify social inequalities, which have their roots in society rather than in biology. Therefore,
questioning social norms, performance expectations and normality is necessary to realize that they represent often invisible aspects of social power (Link 1998). As the social model of disability (Shakespeare/Watson 2002) points out, values, norms and even social structures are based essentially on the needs, skills and opportunities of nondisabled persons. In this view, systematical limitations of social organization hinder all disabled persons to lead their life and shape society in a well-considered and self-determined way. Primarily (man-made) barriers and unequal power relations constitute the severe social restrictions that prevent persons with disabilities from enjoying full social, cultural, economic and political participation in society. Deeply embedded within culture and secured by knowledge systems, Ableism extends this perspective by considering networks of beliefs, processes and social practices which – corresponding to an existing presumption of compulsory ableness in society – establish a particular kind of Self and corporeal standards (Campbell 2008: 153).

Moving the focus from individual experiences of discrimination, an Ableism perspective takes a critical look to structurally anchored social and institutionalized power relations based of personal skills and dis/abilities. Social power-dynamics resulting from ableist mechanisms contribute to an essentialized and negatively rated ontology of disability, which – more or less – has remained substantially unchallenged, even in societies that see themselves as pluralistic and rate diversity as a gain.

One of the biggest challenges today is the current confrontation with a world of growing ableist performance. As Fiona Campbell points out,

one must constantly participate in processes of disability disavowal, aspiring towards normativity, a state of near able-bodiedness, or at very least to effect a state of “passing.” (2008: 156)

At first sight it seems to be obvious that the orientation towards personal achievement can be useful to ensure social participation and growing possibilities for living. Assuming that we all have – at least to a certain extent – internalized associated social values, however, raises the question if ableist concepts have a deep impact on processes of subjectivation. Social constructions of abled subjects become the standard of the normal. These unconscious, pre-discursive but fundamental bases of positive self-images devaluate people with disabilities and frequently justify their social position as an inferior, marginalized social group.

Even if subjectivation never follows a unitary way, determined by social norms, attributions and expectations, internalization of ableist values cannot be interpreted as a neutral gesture. Devaluation and recognition of personal skills, capabilities and potentiality shape and inspire personal de-
velopment. They influence the way we perceive social issues and interactions and frequently inform knowledge systems, social regulations and institutionalized practices. Considering that people with disabilities experience and create a specific way of subjectivation, we have to broaden the perspective that places primarily impairment-effects and social barriers in the center of the debate. Looking through a lens, influenced by Ableism, one reason for this could be that disabled people are – on the one hand – repeatedly reminded of negative attributions and ontologies related to them, on the other confronted frequently with social advantages granted to those who are “ready” for abled bodied performances. This area of personal as well as social tension suggests disabiling personal experiences of vulnerability and oppression day after day. Furthermore, it is very likely that social power relations and negatively rated attributes affect people internally and could lead to some incorporation of internalized ableism, either on a conscious or unconscious level.

Once oppression has been internalized, little force is needed to keep us submissive. We harbour inside ourselves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives. (Mason in Campbell 2005: 157)

Even if one can observe social developments through which disability acceptance and self-determined design options are increasingly available, a significant number of disabled people still miss positive images of disability, experiences of self-efficacy and possibilities to reject social expectations. Nevertheless, more and more people are telling stories of success in spite of impairment, reclaiming disability identities characterized by dignity and pride (see Fox in this volume). Still, political interventions worldwide are necessary to make social inequalities and challenging live situations visible, to strengthen people with disabilities in their (legal) rights.

Politics of identity

Taking account of social experiences of minority groups, social movements and civil society organizations frequently interpret identity politics as a valuable tool for political work and resistance. Associated approaches suggest frequently that the living conditions of social groups are largely similar, so that there might be good reasons to assume common social interests and political demands. Within the social movement of persons with disabilities it has been important to consider disability as a starting point of political, educational and social frameworks. Public representations as a
homogeneous group with common concerns have been essential for developing political demands because this strategy contributed to political debates, strengthened political argumentations and ensured group cohesion and solidarity. As Makkonen highlights:

> For all practical and political purposes, groups are always presented […] as more homogenous than they really are. Simplification and generalization makes the speaking of a group more pragmatic, as it would be burdensome to keep the true diversity of the group in mind all the time. An agenda, which would represent the true interests of the whole group in all its diversity, would simply be too diverse, unclear and perhaps self-contradictory, and would hence not be viable and would have little chance of political success. (Makkonen 2002: 23)

Even if it is neither possible nor meaningful to represent the actual degree of difference in a political framework, claiming common interests and political demands also implies that some requests remain unmentioned and visible only to a limited extent. One result of these dynamics could be to establish narrow and essentialist concepts of political group interests. This necessarily involves denying power relations, levelling different political positions and silencing dissenting voices. Patterns of interpretation, contents and opinions within the disability movement are developed in the light of different personal experiences, with different senses of identity and in diverse political contexts. There is one special group within the disability movement, however, that dominates key issues and political demands: physically disabled, white men, situated particularly in the middle class (Waldschmidt 1997: 50):

> The staff and leadership of the disability movement in the United States [is] almost completely white, middle class, and until recently, male. In each of the early historical shifts of the disability movement, however, women, people of color, gays and lesbians, and others who did not fit the proffered stereotype were active members. Evident in anecdotal accounts and early writings on the lived disability experience were representatives of all these groups who were important players doing important work for the community without public acknowledgment or equal rewards for their contributions (O’Tool Corbett 2004: 295).

From this perspective, it is highly debatable which discourses, which sense of identities, which political positions and which goals become visible in the public. Even if we cannot assume a certain tendency to prefer a special segment of interests within the disability movement, this kind of representational politics could be problematic. One of the effects might be that the specific social localization of the representatives leads to limited perspectives. Since unequal readiness and the lack of opportunities to get involved prevent full participation for many disabled persons, a minority within the social group takes on the responsibility to defend the social in-
terests and political requirements of persons who are less embedded in po-

citical contexts and who stay marginalized. This is succinctly put by Uc-
cellulari (2008: 29):

Any measure aimed at addressing the disadvantage of the group as a whole, with-
ou distinction, will be inappropriate to improve the situation of the whole group,
because the causes of the disadvantage will not be the same for all within its pa-
rameters. Further: such efforts may only be of assistance to the ‘dominant’ mem-
ers of a disadvantaged group and so not target those who are the most disadvan-
taged within the disadvantaged.

Even if the political language has changed and the life opportunities of
persons with disabilities seemingly opened in the last decades, one must
assume that the extent and structure of social inequalities within “the disa-
bled” are different. Representation politics, however, remains purely sym-
boic if the requirements do not reflect the interests of marginalized per-
sons within this social group. Focusing on disability as a homogeneous
master category contributes to specific power relations and increases so-
cial risks within the social group. Another possible effect might be that po-
itical actors and decision-makers frequently refer to oversimplified analy-
sis that takes account of just one cause of disadvantage, which risks mis-
understanding multiple discrimination. It can be assumed that the social
localization and status of persons with disabilities affects – and is affected
by – structural issues and the specific intersection of personal, economic,
legal and political aspects.

Convention

While governments usually avoid measures that have negative impacts on
people with disabilities, it is necessary to point out that disability policies
are usually concerned with health, impairment prevention and social care
rather than social participation and equal rights (Degener 2009). Neverthe-
less, important steps to improve the living conditions of persons with disa-
abilities have been taken – even in the context of neoliberal development
and far-reaching welfare state reforms. The Convention on the Rights of
Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), seen as crucial for en-
suring equal citizenship, is used as a starting point for social development.
Dignity, equality, accessibility of the environment and social participation
are recognized as central guidelines of this UN framework, which changed
the status and legal rights of persons with disability in a significant way.
Following a rights-based approach, universal access to equal political,
economic, cultural and social opportunities is the central political demand
of the convention. Within the framework of this contract, 167 states worldwide undertake various efforts to realize corresponding requirements and objectives. The removal of physical and social barriers, the development of universal design and accessible technology and the expansion of inclusive public programs and services are valued as the most important political interventions to improve living conditions and make social change possible.

These key issues within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) set an antidiscriminatory international standard, which has influenced many governments to take disability rights more seriously. Following one of the major concerns of the convention, international disability organizations, more than 400 nongovernmental organizations and disabled experts participated in the development processes, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Degener 2009). Their experience, knowledge and interests have been used as an indispensable starting point for research, political analysis and decision-making. Aiming to make disability concerns an integral dimension of social protection and inclusion, mainstreaming strategies are emphasized as important instruments to implement equality policies. Considering the political demands of people with disabilities in all policies, social routines and political innovations would set a positive precedent in public international law. Mainstreaming a disability perspective is:

…the process of assessing the implications for women and men with disabilities of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making people with disabilities’ concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men with disabilities benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve disability equality. (Handicap International 2012)

Disability mainstreaming is interpreted as one of the most important political tools to reach full social participation for people who face – permanent or for a significant period of time – social restrictions caused by impairments or other medical conditions. Starting from a rights-based perspective and taking specific needs of disabled people into account, mainstreaming strategies should lead to political, economic and social transformations. Associated strategies, however, require fundamental changes in perspective and political commitment because they are moving “away from charity-based or medical-based approaches to disability to a new perspective stemming from and firmly grounded in human rights” (Pillay in Degener 2009: 201).
Based on the political framework of the CRPD, the European Union focuses on antidiscrimination law and equality norms, tailored to the various ways how persons with disability live their daily lives. With equality goals in mind, targets cover both civil and political rights in and outside the field of employment. Associated policies center primarily on efforts to reduce the risks of social exclusion and poverty and to ensure equal access to healthcare and other valued goods and social services.

As the European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination points out, in the last decade social development and some progress in addressing disability concerns can be observed. However, the network highlights that “in many EU member states there have been no significant changes introduced in law and policy following ratification of the CRPD” (Waddington/Broderick/Poulos 2016: 150). Given that European states are constituted by very different economic, sociopolitical and legal systems, which might be a cause for nationally specific policy processes, this is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, “there remain significant problems on the ground in terms of achieving equality, equal opportunity and equal access for people with disabilities across many fields, not least of all education” (Waddington/Broderick/Poulos 2016: 17). These results validate a report of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015), which provided a first overview on how disability policies and requirements have been realized since the CRPD came into force. Related to European Union policies the committee observed that awareness-raising strategies on the rights of persons with disabilities are not continuous, do not include all institutions and exclude certain groups of persons with disabilities. Even if Europe failed to conduct a cross-cutting, comprehensive review of its legislation, important progress and positive trends in some social sectors can be seen. Critical voices, however, underline that lasting success is not possible if little effort is made to develop harmonized policies and strategies.

Additionally, there is a lack of a systematic and institutionalized approach to mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities across all of Europe. Developing disability mainstreaming policies requires an emancipatory research framework and data collection as well as the continuous participation of persons with disabilities. Others go further and insist on structural changes in all spheres of society and a sufficient distribution of financial resources (Verloo 2006). The subsequent efforts to social change might help to develop a growing knowledge about supportive factors, contributing to improved standards of living, access and full participation in society.
Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming, considered as a set of innovative and transformative political concepts and equality strategies, is usually valued as a guiding principle in European Anti-Discrimination Law. Introduced at the *Fourth World Conference on Women*, which took place in Beijing in 1995, gender mainstreaming strategies entail “[t]he systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men into all policies” (Commission of the European Communities 1996: 67) and should help to strengthen gender equality worldwide. The Council of Europe offers the following definition of gender equality:

Gender equality means an equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in all spheres of public and private life [...] Gender equality is not synonymous with sameness with establishing men, their life-style and conditions as the norm. [...] Gender equality means accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society (Council of Europe 1998: 7-8).

It seems to be generally recognized nowadays that gender roles, norms and expectations are constructed in a culturally specific way. At least in the Western world there is a growing agreement that gender expectations should not have any negative impact on personal or public spheres of life. This cannot be taken for granted, however, since social contexts usually assume a certain universality and neutrality of current gender norms. Especially gender analysis, gender sensitive research and women’s movements contribute to questioning the supposed self-evidence of associated social processes and power relations. These approaches help to create the necessary conditions for critical comments, political action and the development of equal policies, sometimes realized in legal regulations and mainstreaming. In this context economic independence, equal access to the labor market and good quality education are recognized as the most important targets to avoid gender hierarchies, to remove imbalances and to ensure shared responsibility and social solidarity in society.

Already in 2010, the *International Network of Women with Disabilities* tried to figure out whether gender mainstreaming ensured their civil and political rights. Given women's movement policies usually refer to healthy, normal and nondisabled women (Waldschmidt 1997: 52), it is hardly surprising that the living conditions and prospects of women with disabilities stayed largely unnoticed at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Neither the social relevance of their concerns, nor the essential political contribution of disability perspectives were recognized, and the same happened to political statements and the increasing demand for in-
ternational networking (Arnade/Häfner 2005: 4). This clearly shows to what extent different senses of identities and hierarchical power relations within social groups affect possibilities to gain political influence and participate. Moreover, mainstreaming policies usually fail to accommodate different living conditions. The International Network of Women with Disabilities noted that in most societies severe discrimination based on gender and disabilities are ongoing problems and that

[t]here is an enormous gap in the legal system between the effort to provide for fundamental human rights and the reality for women with disabilities. (International Network of Women with Disabilities 2010: 9)

Gender mainstreaming, which regards political and social implications of any planned action in all political, economic and societal spheres, is directly linked to a legal framework. As the *World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development* (2012) highlights, law and justice are essential factors in achieving equality. Associated regulations specify political goals and support – but also prevent – the implementation of concrete equality strategies. Even if legal systems should be recognized as agents of change and social transformation, basic understandings of equality are developed against the background of social norms and cultural values. Therefore, it seems to be evident that a narrow, legalistic perspective is not able to challenge social inequality. Following Thompson’s (2016) reflections, antidiscrimination policies need a wide approach, including all dimensions of diversity and incorporating sociological, political and economic concerns above and beyond the law.

Aiming to reduce the wide gender gaps in society and organizations, mainstreaming in general focuses on structural causes of social inequality. It anticipates the future consequences of existing policies and tries to prevent undesired developments and their future reproduction (Squires 2007: 45f). As a component of organizational transformation, gender mainstreaming strategies and guidelines are currently applied as key components of a new management culture. Trendsetting innovations, however, often reach their limits when encountering the stability of institutional structures and routines. Not only do mainstreaming policies not always seek to achieve the most efficient use of financial resources, reality shows that power relations and hierarchies – in society and organizations – remain surprisingly stable. Business interests and the external representation of organizations might sometimes be in conflict with the concrete extent of implementing equality policies. Therefore, critical voices underline that mainstreaming could be seen more as an administrative and technocratic instrument of organizational development than as a political strategy that
ensures social change and gender equality (Emmerich/Hormel 2013: 187f). Life choices and opportunities are determined by various factors, therefore social inequalities are as specific as the life experiences of marginalized people (Verloo 2006: 222). Recognizing the interdependency of all dimensions of social difference, equality policies and associated strategies like mainstreaming must be re-visited. Especially in view of multiple discrimination, intersectional approaches and political concepts as well as action plans need further development.

Intersectionality

Starting from the premise that female lives and experience are comparable with each other, feminist-oriented policies until the 1990s usually claimed to speak in the name of all women. Women of color as well as women with disabilities, however, could frequently not identify with the demands of mainstream feminism and criticized generalizing political statements. They experienced being regarded as the others – whose concerns were not listened to and trivialized as special interests (Walgenbach 2007: 38). Making their specific living conditions, social localizations and political standpoints visible, they distanced themselves from identity-political concepts of representation and started a broad discussion about social differences and power relations between women. Nowadays, intersectional approaches that also try to make hidden social inequalities visible are regarded as one of the most important outcomes of these controversies. Aiming to specify the effects of interlocking social power relations, intersectionality emphasizes primarily interdependences between social inequalities and various axes of difference. Kimberlé Crenshaw took up this notion in 1989, criticizing the fact that antidiscrimination laws ensure legal protection only to a limited extent. Referring specifically to the interrelations between race and gender, Crenshaw underlined that neither the gender aspects of racial discrimination nor the racial aspects of gender discrimination are fully comprehended within human rights and social movement approaches (Crenshaw 1991). Conceptualizing intersectionality, she tries

[...] to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other discriminatory systems create background inequalities that structure the relative positions of women, races, ethnicities, classes, and the like. Moreover, it addresses the way that specific acts and
policies create burdens that flow along these axes constituting the dynamic or active aspects of disempowerment. (Crenshaw 2000: no page)

Focusing on social categories like race, class and gender, Crenshaw puts legal criteria in the center of her approach and underlines that specific acts and policies might strengthen asymmetrical power distributions and intensify social inequality and injustice. Critically, the question arises if the problem of social discrimination can be addressed in an appropriate manner with continuous reference to abstract social categories and the generalizations related to them.

It is essential to consider concrete social arrangements and interdependencies between culture, politics, economy and law, Katharina Walgenbach (2007) points out. Viewed from this perspective it is particularly important to recognize the significance of social relations of dominance as well as impacts arising from social positions and status. Winker and Degele (2009), however, set different priorities. Starting from a critique of neoliberal policy development in capitalist societies, their concept of multilevel analysis relates to interdependencies between social structures, the symbolic order of society and identity formations that influence power relations to a high degree. Thus, their interest is primarily focused on economic, political and cultural dimensions of intersectionality, so that research can answer the question how social inequality is (symbolically) reproduced, represented and legitimized. Critical reflections on social norms, ideologies and hegemonic social habits are used as central points in these discussions, which try to understand how oppression might overlap at different levels in society (Winker/Degele 2009).

In intersectionality research the question arises if people with multiple assignments to marginalized social groups experience more disadvantages than others. If this occurs, power effects multiply and produce a different and particularly new, complex quality of privilege or discrimination, which is different from what each of the single categories would produce separately. Against this background one must assume that our senses of identity in fact are multiple, marked by various dimensions of social difference like gender, race, class and ability. But intersectionality considers more than that. Approaches remind us “that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins 2000: 18). Aiming to clarify in which ways social regulations contribute to inequality, high priority should be given to critical reflections of structural power relations, legal systems, politics and the economy. Moreover, it is very important to consider institutionalized soci-
ocultural habits, contextual value systems, processes of embodiment and related senses of identities.

Questioning whether disability can be interpreted as a master category is a precondition for intersectional research and development. Associated simplifications and generalizations, which assume a separate way of life, similar identity concepts and shared interests of “the disabled”, have come under severe criticism. Furthermore, it should be recognized that disability is part of the stable, ableist and paternalistic relations in society and culture, reproduced in different social fields such as education, employment, social protection and health care. Heike Raab (2007) defines this social category as a multiple concept and social practice, embedded in culture as well as associated with social power relations and inequality. Highly affected by racism, class, sexism and heteronormativity, disability can – from her point of view – be interpreted as an interdependent category of social differentiation, associated with economy, law, social policies and identities.

Nowadays, the political and legal frameworks connected to disability frequently refer to multiple forms of discrimination, whereas intersectionality considers interdependencies between race, class, gender and disability. Searching to understand associated social challenges, it seems clear that we first need to develop an increased awareness of personal privileges and disadvantages, which would possibly enable more nuanced discussions about interlocking dimensions of social inequality. What we need to clarify, as Meike Verloo suggests, is “a clear conceptualization of how intersectionality operates, a theory of the power dynamics of a specific inequality, as well as a choice for a clear political goal” (Verloo 2006: 222). As such, intersectional approaches should be able to expand existing knowledge about the specifics and particularities of social differences and to refine explanations of mutual interdependences. Analyzing legal, economic, social and cultural conditions of social inequality might help to reflect power dynamics, to identify inhibiting effects of social and institutional habits and to make the social backgrounds of identity concepts understandable.

It is important to recognize, however, that there are no (political) goals for all. This interest in avoiding homogenization might help to understand the complexity of interdependent social regulations that mark privilege and oppression. In this way intersectionality contributes to changing concepts of social disadvantages by making marginalized social experiences and hidden discrimination visible (Murphy et al. 2009: 7f). In this context, it seems to be indispensable to stand up for a more balanced distribution of
resources, for public recognition and institutional commitment and – above all – it is crucial to develop concepts that allow critical objection as well as concrete action.

Conclusion

Particularly because we should recognize disability rights as a universal claim in society, it is necessary to clarify the specific aspects of associated inequalities and to demand more specific responses to related social and political challenges. It is important to pay full attention to personal experiences, which are – now or in the future – associated with vulnerabilities, limitations and disabling social environments. In this context, it is necessary to examine to what extent and in what respects social locations, based on categories like race, class and gender, lead to social inequalities and to different access to valued social goods and services. Equality, access and full participation in society undoubtedly are the most relevant guiding goals related to disadvantaged social groups. Discussing the effects of rights-based approaches, antidiscrimination policies and strategies of mainstreaming show that public representation of political analyses, interests and goals differ significantly depending on the specific dimensions of diversity that they are dealing with (Verloo 2006). The resulting power relations and dominance in and between social groups demonstrate that a fundamental re-thinking of diversity policies, mainstreaming and political alliances is required. At a political level – as Jahan (1996) stresses – we need an agenda that includes the transformation and reorientation of existing political paradigms, new approaches for decision-making processes, a clear prioritization of equality objectives and a consideration of policy ends.

Economic, legal, cultural, social and personal influences contribute to inequalities and act in combination, so that some social groups require specific protection under the law. Aiming to point out the conceptual implications and concrete effects of interdependences and power relations, intersectional approaches contribute to a completely different understanding of social inequality. Making also hidden discrimination visible, intersectionality recognizes that persons have different access to resources and social influence, resulting from their social location. Even if a high risk of poverty and social inclusion of disabled persons exists, life opportunities have changed and multiplied. Only if we succeed in opening political, scientific and everyday discourses can we recognize the plurality of social
conditions and different dimensions of social inequality. To develop different perspectives, however, needs more than appreciating and recognizing diversity. Efforts associated with intersectionality always aim at social change, at questioning dominant norms and at a fundamental rethinking of institutionalized actions and attitudes. Neither human rights instruments, antidiscrimination laws, mainstreaming nor intersectional research will necessarily work within common principles of the existing political and scientific agenda. Therefore, far reaching cultural changes and structural shifts, connected with reflections about political goals and research interests, are necessary to achieve social improvements that relate – for example – to persons with disabilities.

List of Abbreviations

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