

Living with a disability in Malta: some cultural, geographical and historical aspects.

Anne-Marie Callus

10th April, 2019. Mediterranean Institute Seminar: *Living with a disability in a Mediterranean context.*

Socially-created barriers are experienced by disabled people the world over, barriers that prevent those with physical, sensory, mental or neurological impairments from participating fully in the mainstream of society on an equal basis with their fellow citizens. The impact that these barriers have over the lives of disabled people is attested by the fact that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability has, since it was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006, been ratified by 192 countries, including those located in the Mediterranean region.¹ The rights upheld in this Convention reflect the many aspects of life in which disabled people face barriers to inclusion: education, employment, health and rehabilitation services, family life, and living in the community, among others.

The particularities of how each disabled people experiences these barriers – and hopefully also a lack of them – depend on the situation of each individual. No two disabled people are the same, even if they have the same medical condition or impairment. This is not only because the impact of these conditions and impairments varies from one person to another, but also because each person's situation is also impacted by that person's abilities,

¹ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>.

aptitudes and interests; their family and socioeconomic background; and the time and space that they happen to inhabit.

It is on the latter that we are focusing today, that is on how the space that disabled people live in impacts on their life experiences, the opportunities they enjoy, and the barriers that they have to struggle against. Spaces are of course geographical entities, with their own sociocultural characteristics. The space in the world occupied by the Mediterranean is associated with cultures that value close family ties, that are not as individualistic as countries in more northerly latitudes, and whose moral values are very much informed by the dominant religion of that country.

How do these various factors impinge on the lives of disabled people in Malta? This is the broad question that we are addressing in this seminar. Malta's history, geography, and sociocultural environment all play a part in the way disabled people's lives pan out in our small island state. The British, the last in a very long line of colonisers that goes back over two millennia, left us with English as a second language and relatively easy access to all that has been written about disability in that language. And, as it happens, it was in the UK and the USA that disabled people first started militating against the obstacles that prevented them from being full citizens of their own country. In his account of 'the genesis of disability studies in Malta', Joe Camilleri – former Chair of the National Commission Persons with Disability – writes thus:

In the 1990s, major influences ... included the work of UPIAS (1976), Irving Zola (1979), Gerben de Jong (1979), Finkelstein and Oliver (1990), and Morris (1991). ... It will be obvious then that to a certain extent our main influences have tended to

be drawn from the British model, rather than the European continent, or the United States. Perhaps this too is a form of colonisation?²

The model that Camilleri is referring to is of course the social model of disability, which the late Mike Oliver coined in 1990 in his seminal book *The Politics of Disablement*³ to encapsulate the idea that it is not the presence of biological impairment that hinders a person from participating in society, but the fact that the vast majority of societies are ill-prepared to cater for the impairment-related needs of disabled people, by providing physical accessibility and access to information and communication; by creating inclusive environments; and above all by accepting impairment as an inevitable part of the human condition. The social model of disability leads to the realisation, as so many disabled people have attested, that difficulties encountered by disabled people are not an inevitable consequence of having an impairment which cannot be fixed, but arise from a society that needs fixing in order to be rendered inclusive of disabled people.

The social model of disability thus shifts the responsibility for change from the individual to society. Consequently, it makes discussions of specific sociocultural contexts relevant. In fact, contrary to what some may think, when the social model of disability began to be used in Malta, it was affected by various factors that are peculiar to our islands. In his Prologue to Briguglio and Brown's *Sociology of the Maltese Islands*⁴, Godfrey Baldacchino provides a vivid picture of what he calls 'the geo-political smorgasbord on which unfolds the

² Camilleri, J. 2006. The Genesis of Disability Studies in Malta: from a colonial past to an independent future? Keynote speech delivered at the University of Lancaster Disability Studies Conference: <https://crpd.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/lancastercamilleri.pdf>.

³ Oliver, M. 1990. *The Politics of Disablement*. Macmillan: <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Oliver-p-of-d-Oliver-contents.pdf>.

⁴ Baldacchino, G. 2016. Prologue. In *Sociology of the Maltese Islands*, M. Briguglio & M. Brown (eds), pp. 4-10). Malta: Gutenberg Press.

contemporary Maltese society' (p.7), a smorgasbord that comprises, among others, influences by a very long list of colonisers, and 21st century technology mixing directly with jealously preserved age-old habits, with the influence of the Catholic Church never being far away.

Two of the major factors that impact on disabled people's lives in Malta are also associated with Mediterranean cultures: family values and the influence of religion, in our case Roman Catholicism. Regardless of the changes that Maltese families have gone through over time, family ties are still strong. These ties emerge clearly from some of the contributions to *Sociology of the Maltese Islands*, especially in the chapters by Angela Abela and Joanne Cassar.⁵ Furthermore, a Eurostat survey carried out in 2015 shows that the average age at which young people leave the family home in Malta is almost 32 years, well above the European average of around 26 years.⁶ Overprotection is experienced by many young people in Malta, but even more so by young people with disability, for whom it may carry on well into adulthood, as my colleagues and I found in recent research carried out about overprotection in the lives of people with intellectual disability.⁷

⁵ Abela, A. 2016. Family Life. In M. Briguglio and M. Brown (eds), *Sociology of the Maltese Islands.*, 17–48. Luqa, Malta: Miller.

Cassar, J. 2016. Youth. In M. Briguglio and M. Brown (eds) *Sociology of the Maltese Islands.*, 69–82. Luqa, Malta: Miller.

⁶ Eurostat 2015. Being young in Europe today – family and society. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Being_young_in_Europe_today_-_family_and_society.

⁷ Callus, A.M., Bonello, I., Mifsud, C. & Fenech, R. (2019): Overprotection in the lives of people with intellectual disability in Malta: knowing what is control and what is enabling support, *Disability & Society*, DOI: 10.1080/09687599.2018.1547186

Parents have played a key part in fighting for disabled people's rights and in campaigning for appropriate service provision in various aspects of life, especially in the past six decades.⁸

The Church too has played an important part in the development of the disability sector in Malta, especially after the Second World War. The key figure is undoubtedly Monsignor Mikiel Azzopardi who worked hard to disassociate disability from shame, something to be kept as a family secret. His work to take disabled people out of the cellars of their family homes and provide them with a dignified and decent life is well-known and well-documented.⁹ This work is also recognised as bringing about a sea change in attitudes towards disabled people. In the 1960s, when Monsignor Azzopardi started his work, speaking of disabled people in terms of their being angels and emphasizing the Christian duty to be charitable towards them was very effective in bringing about the necessary change. Unfortunately, the discourse persists and while most disabled people in Malta are well aware of their rights, they still do not enjoy life 'on an equal basis with others' as envisaged by the UN Convention. They're still seen by many as being objects of charity and not rights-holding subjects. Their continued dependence of the family – because of a lack of adequate services that promote an independent life – is not necessarily seen as being problematic by the general population.

⁸ Azzopardi, A. 2009. *Understanding Disability Politics in Malta*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Muller. Camilleri, J., and A. M. Callus. 2001. "Out of the cellars. Disability, politics and the struggle for change: the Maltese experience." In L. Barton (ed.) *Disability, Politics and the Struggle for Change.*, 79–92. London: David Fulton.

⁹ Bonnici, A. 2005. *Id-Dar tal-Providenza minsuāa fil-ħajja ta' Monsinjur Mikiel Azzopardi*. Siāāiewi, Malta: Dar tal-Providenza.

Cuschieri, L. 1995. *Monsinjur Mikiel Azzopardi 1910-1987*. Malta: Lino Cuschieri.

To learn more about the lives of disabled people in Malta, in today's seminar we are presenting recent research. Amy Camilleri Zahra is presenting on the representations of disabled women in the Maltese cultural context. Her presentation will be followed by Claire Azzopardi Lane who will focus on the impact of culture and religion on disabled people's lives in relation to sexual autonomy. Finally, Vickie Gauci will present research about disabled technology users in relation to employment and how the barriers they face are partly due to attitudinal and cultural factors. Together these presentations will allow us a glimpse into the lives of Maltese disabled people in the twenty-first century and how those lives are affected by geographical and cultural locations.