

## **Beyond Disability rights towards Disability justice.**

*Why global north INGO's are so scared of this framework*

*And why it is the only way forward.*

*"There is no neutral body from which our bodies deviate. Society has written deep into each strand of tissue of every living person on earth...What our bodies require in order to thrive, is what the world requires. If there is a map to get there, it can be found in the atlas of our skin and bone and blood, in the tracks of neurotransmitters and antibodies."*

*From Aurora Levins Morales' book: Kindling*

My name is Srushti Mahamuni. I am a brown skinned, cis gendered, queer woman, living without a visible disability. I am an intersectional feminist. I currently live in the Netherlands where I enjoy able-body, cis-het passing, class, education and citizenship privilege.

For three years now, I am employed at an INGO that works on Disability rights. My interest in the topic of disability rights began when I started working for this organization. I don't claim lived experience of navigating the world with disability and yet I have learned from people with lived experience, devoured knowledge and have come to see disability justice as intertwined with the fight for gender equality, racial justice and to dismantling the multiple patriarchies that govern our world.

Situated in an international development organization based in the global north, I naively imagined that passionate people working towards the same cause of disability rights would surely be on board with pushing the envelope and embracing disability justice? Surely those who see ableist oppression are ready to dismantle other systems of oppression? But for three years now I've straddled the tension between the concepts of diversity, rights, inclusion, justice. People say, 'it's just a language issue, just words' and yet words are so much more than semantics. It defines of the boundaries of our questioning – of the world we live in and of ourselves. And Disability Justice offers a framework for this questioning. In this paper, I respond to popular

critiques I've often heard from fellow practitioners in disability rights. I explore this tension between why the INGO sector in the global north is so hesitant to work with the disability justice framework and offer up an urgent plea for why it should.

ID: Poster that explains the difference between Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Justice

**Diversity asks, 'Who's in the room?'**

**Equity responds: 'Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?'**

**Inclusion asks, 'Have everyone's ideas been heard?'**

**Justice responds, 'Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?'**

**Diversity asks, 'How many more of [pick any minoritized identity] group do we have this year than last?'**

**Equity responds, 'What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?'**

**Inclusion asks, 'Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong?'**

**Justice challenges, 'Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?'**

- Dr. DL Stewart

### ***What is Disability Justice?***

Disability justice is a framework that was created by a group of queer, disabled, activists<sup>1</sup> of color in the US in 2005. It was born from the realization that the current Disability Rights Movement that includes advocacy organizations, service provision agencies, constituency led centers, membership-based national organizations, as well as cultural and academic spaces are often single-issue identity based and work in silos. It is a framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression and pushes us to question the root causes of inequity.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrica Berne, Mia Mingus, Leroy Moore, Stacey Milbern, Eli Clare and Sebastian Margaret.

**“We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated “other” ...”**

– Patricia Berne, Sins Invalid

It is perhaps this very call to incorporate intersectionality that scares the INGO sector. After all, we have managed to so neatly compartmentalize and commodify the pain and struggles of ‘those others’ out there in the developing countries into ‘thematic areas’, that we almost forget that the issues we are working on, are people’s real lives.

The framework of disability justice offers ten principles and in this paper I will draw upon these principles to untangle some of the critique I’ve commonly heard from my colleagues in the INGO sector and offer suggestions to move beyond.

ID: 10 principles of disability justice

**10 PRINCIPLES OF DISABILITY JUSTICE**

- 1 INTERSECTIONALITY** *“We do not live single issue lives” --Audre Lorde*  
Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”
- 2 LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED**  
*“We are led by those who most know these systems.” --Aurora Levins Morales*
- 3 ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITIC**  
In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds.
- 4 COMMITMENT TO CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING**  
Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.
- 5 RECOGNIZING WHOLENESS**  
People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.
- 6 SUSTAINABILITY**  
We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.
- 7 COMMITMENT TO CROSS-DISABILITY SOLIDARITY**  
We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.
- 8 INTERDEPENDENCE** We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over our lives.
- 9 COLLECTIVE ACCESS** As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.
- 10 COLLECTIVE LIBERATION** No body or mind can be left behind -- only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

**SINS INVALID 2015** [www.sinsinvalid.org](http://www.sinsinvalid.org)

***Critique 1: “Intersectionality is such a complex and theoretical concept”***

More recently, the INGO sector is embracing the concept of intersectionality. In fact I work on a program that was previously called The Intersectionality Consortium. One of our biggest struggles in this program has been that not many folks, including our partners in the global north and global south, understand the concept of intersectionality. Too wordy, too theoretical. Some of the partners even call it ‘Intersexuality’, leading to the assumption that it is our program that is about LGBTQ rights. This misunderstanding even led to a few Disabled People’s organizations on the African continent, dropping out of the program. At first, we spent a lot of energy trying to explain that this is not an LGBTQ rights program but an SRHR advocacy program. But then at some point we realised that the very nature of intersectional SRHR advocacy means that we it is also as much an LGBTQ program as it is a gender equality program as it is disability inclusion program. The whole point of incorporating intersectional lens in our program required us to break out of these single issue silos and work on multiple issues at the same time. The way we addressed this to not talk in jargon and break it down to people’s lived experience as much as possible. When done well, people see that it is actually about power and they recognize all the different identities that they have and how these interact to create privilege or oppression and that working intersectionally is actually beneficial to their current work. It’s not been a smooth process but it is essential if we want to go beyond addressing the symptoms of inequity to the root causes.

***Critique 2: “Disability justice is so American. Our global south partners are not ready for it.”***

This piece of critique often comes from program staff who often take offense to the fact that activists shaped this framework. Yes, disability justice was born in the US and the framework centers voices of marginalized people living in a United States

context. And yet, if we go beyond our initial hesitance and hear the words instead of the accent speaking them we realize that the values in this framework can be applied universally. Perhaps, the issue is not with where the framework was born but rather what it asks of us, particularly those in the global north. It asks us to question our privilege. It asks us to make space for the leadership of those most impacted. It asks us to question capitalist politics and to recognize inherent worth of human beings outside of productivity. It asks us to trust each other and to allow for interdependence.

How do we make space for wholeness when we've reduced human lives to result indicators? How do we fit the diversity of the human experience into neatly quantifiable numbers in a PMEL matrix. Is there space for leadership of those most impacted? It seems as if there is, given the incessant conversation on shifting the power to the south for the past 10 years. But how can our partners lead from the south when the money sits in the north and asks for receipts on every little penny spent?

So perhaps, it is not that our global south partners are not ready for it. Maybe the global north is not ready for it and does not want to say that.

***Critique 3: "All this collective liberation talk sounds like hippy dippy bullshit."***

Audre Lorde said: I'm not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.

The SDG 2030 agenda led with a bold motto, leave no one behind. While catchy, this doesn't take into account that people are not merely left behind, they are actively pushed behind. When center those living in the margins in our politics and programs, we create a better world for everyone. This is because it is not possible to improve the quality of life for those most marginalized without improving the quality of life for everyone. If the world is made such that people with disabilities are able to access it without exhaustion, it is a more accessible world for everyone. If transpeople are able to fully express their gender identity without having to fight for it, it is a world that

allows uninhibited freedom for expression for everyone. Creating a world that centers the margins requires a questioning of the current status quo. It requires us to break free from the harmful shackles of the ableist cis-hetero-patriarchy. It requires we question the models of capitalist growth that has led to plunder people and planet and demands that we pace ourselves so that we can all be sustained long term.

Embracing disability justice will require the INGO sector in the global north to question the ways in which we show up in the world , truthfully introspect while sitting in the discomfort of our colonial legacies and dismantle the current status quo.

And yes collective liberation may sound like a hippy utopia, and perhaps it is. But it is the only way we can move forward together as people with mixed abilities, multiracial, multi-gendered, mixed class, across the orientation spectrum and really make sure that no body/mind is left behind.

*We hum as we travel, songs heavy with maps that*

*lead us back to ourselves*

*singing you, yes you, are irreplaceable.*

*Here we are,*

*and here we are fruitful*

*our stories flower, take wing, reproduce like wind blown seeds.*

*from "Listen, Speak" in Kindling: Writings On the Body by Aurora Levins Morales*