

#IDPD2021: Meet these powerful activists in the intersection of LGBTI and disabilities!

[Blog](#), [Inclusion and Equality](#), [Disability](#), [Intersectionality](#)

Dina, Ingrid and Louise are three LGBTI activists with disabilities based in different parts of Europe. They're fighting for disabled LGBTI people to have a seat in LGBTI movements, and for equal rights in society. This International Day of Persons With Disabilities, they tell us about their aims and activism, and how can everyone be an ally under their motto: Nothing about us without us!

Dina Bajrektarevic: “We must be included in every aspect of political, social, economical and cultural life.”

[Dina](#) is Program's Manager at [Tuzla Open Centre](#). She is based in Tuzla, Bosnia & Herzegovina.



Photo courtesy of Dina Bajrektarevic

How did you get into activism in the intersection of LGBTI and disability?

I've been involved in LGBTI activism since the age of 18. I studied special education and rehabilitation, and I had the opportunity to volunteer with non-governmental organisations that deal with issues for persons with disabilities. I noticed the connections and similarities between the problems of both groups. I realised that both share the same or similar problems with the system that oppresses them and that it is absurd to talk about only one group when we talk about human rights.

All marginalised groups are so connected, intertwined and heterogeneous that we cannot separate them from each other. Within marginalised communities themselves, double marginalisation can occur and we as activists need to take this into account in our actions. We need to be aware of all the needs of our communities we are fighting for. I've realised that it is also necessary to work with the communities to raise awareness of how their multiple identities affect their privileges and life experiences. Human rights are human rights, and it is absurd to omit intersectionality in our work.

What is your current goal as an activist?

My current goal is to promote the importance and role of interactionality. I'm someone who advocates the

decentralisation of activism and who does not tolerate 'selective activism' — because human rights are not a buffet and we cannot choose which rights we will fight for. We cannot fight for the rights of one community and ignore the other, or consciously decide not to deal with their problems as well, because I guarantee you that within the community we are fighting for, there is also the community whose problems we ignore.

“Through my activism, I want to show marginalised communities how connected they are to each other and how beautiful our diversity is.”

Dina Bajrektarevic

My goal is to try and permeate the discussion about the importance of intersectionality and how important and significant it is for our movements. Through my activism, I want to show marginalised communities how connected they are to each other and how beautiful our diversity is. I want to give meaning to how much we can be closer to each other through our identities and life experiences, and how all of that is the key to the fight — which is our common one. The current goal is to explain to people the importance of practicing solidarity.

What can LGBTI people personally do to make sure that people with disabilities are fully included in the movement and society at large?

The first thing we as the LGBTI community need to do is recognise that people with disabilities belong to our community. Our community is diverse and it is one of the things we should be proud of. Our responsibility to the members of our community is to educate ourselves about the problems and *needs* they have (it is important for me to emphasise that I am not referring here to any 'special' needs, but to specific needs arising from different levels of marginalisation). We should educate and inform ourselves about the ways of communicating, organising, practicing inclusive culture and taking care of accessibility during the planning of our events.

We must not forget that accessibility does not only mean architectural accessibility, but also ways of working, organising, approaching a particular issue etc. We have to practice being respectful and as we advocate for human rights, and include people with disabilities within our discussions. We need to remember the phrase, 'nothing about them without them'.

What's your message for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities?

The message for all my comrades and friends with disability is that I stand with you in solidarity at all times. All of us as a community need to ensure your recognition in the LGBTI movement and your recognition and importance in the wider community. On this day, I want you to remember how far you have come in this fight. Our common struggle for dignity, human rights and equality will never stop. It is important for me to emphasise that you are valuable to this society just because you are human.

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I want to take this moment to demand from our community to work with people with disabilities for a far more inclusive and transformative future for everyone. I would also like to demand that we involve people with disabilities in discussions and in all decision-making processes. They must be included in every aspect of political, social, economical and cultural life — I am not asking but demanding. We have to remember to include everyone and that means including people with disabilities in our movements and fights. No one will be left behind.

Happy International Day of Persons with Disabilities! For new fights! Nothing about you without you! In solidarity!

Ingrid Thunem: “I am proud of my disability, but it does not define me.”

Ingrid is a former Paralympic swimmer and activist from Norway



Photo courtesy of Ingrid Thunem

How did you get into activism in the intersection of LGBTI and disability?

I started to be active in the disability community cause I wanted to end discrimination and have a place to meet others in my situation. When I started to be active, I found out I was the only openly queer person in the group I was working with. I also faced quite a lot of homophobia from other disability activists. Many didn't understand why queer rights were something that disability organisations needed to care about.

When I was a teenager I was a part of the queer community, but as my disability progressed I didn't really feel at home and many queer spaces were totally inaccessible for me. I felt alone but I was sure there were others feeling like me, so I wanted to make a change that made it easier for other queer disabled people. That was when I decided I needed to start activism in the intersection.

(Disclaimer: in Norway, the term 'queer' also includes trans people, so when I speak about queer disabled people, of course queer trans people are a part of it!)

"I felt alone but I was sure there were others feeling like me, so I wanted to make a change that made it easier for other queer disabled people."

Ingrid Thunem

What is your current goal as an activist?

Right now, my goal is to raise money for physical meetings for queer and disabled people in Norway. COVID-19 left many people with disabilities isolated and alone, which has led to an increase in mental health issues and loneliness.

There has also been a spike in anti-trans coverage in the media, which has made the situation for trans people with disabilities even harder. There have been fewer physical gatherings and even though a lot of digital gatherings have been organized, I feel like we need to meet in person, both for the social aspect but also to build each other up and support each other in our ongoing activism.

We have also gotten a new Minister for Equality and Culture in Norway, so our hope is that she will listen to the concerns of queer disabled people and keep supporting us. We want to keep raising awareness and showing people that we are here, we are queer and we have disabilities as well.

What can LGBTI people personally do to make sure that people with disabilities are fully included in the movement and society at large?

This is a complex question, since disability is complex. I have a visible disability and use a wheelchair, and for me the main issues with being a part of the queer community have been access. When an event is inaccessible, it takes away my opportunity to be a part of the movement, so making sure your events are accessible is step one, but also to remember that accessibility also can mean being able to bring a carer, costume, lighting or a sign language interpreter. Accessibility is not only about ramps.

The next step is to make sure that people with invisible disabilities also feel welcome. For instance, accessing information and having the possibility to be seated or skip the line might be instrumental to securing inclusion. I think it is important to speak about access and give relevant information about your events. Also, if you see

someone new at an event, speak to them. Welcome people and be inclusive.

As queer people in society we are used to facing discrimination when we are out and about, so we know its effects. Raise questions about disability accessibility. Ask for a ramp at the new club or mention accessibility at work. Together we can make a difference.

“Disabled people are as diverse as anyone else; we can be queer, and we deserve a seat at the queer table.”

Ingrid Thunem

What’s your message for the International Day of Persons With Disabilities?

My message is, don’t forget that it is all about human rights. Disabled people are as diverse as anyone else; we can be queer, and we deserve a seat at the queer table. For many people with disabilities, it is hard to be allowed to be yourself. You are pushed into a box by society, where the disability is seen as the most instrumental part of you. You are often not asked what you want or are not allowed to take ownership of your own body. I am proud of my disability, but it does not define me.

Having a disability is just one identity and one aspect of being human. Listen to people with disabilities. Don’t let a person’s disability define how you act around them, be open to the fact that everyone is different, and that diversity is what makes us better humans.

Louise Ashworth: “Making assumptions results in disabled people not being treated as equals and negates the valuable contribution that we make.”

Louise is National Chair at Barnardo’s Disability Network and member of UNISON. They are based in the UK.



Photo courtesy of Louise Ashworth.

How did you get into activism in the intersection of LGBTI and disability?

I experienced being LGBTI as a disabled person differently to non-disabled LGBTI people. I had to come out both as LGBTI and disabled, but there was a feeling of isolation and exclusion because meetings were held in non-accessible buildings, were not inclusive or accessible, and there was a stigma about being disabled.

I joined a protest against a LGBTI social venue in Manchester which had intentionally flouted the building provisions of the then Disability Discrimination Act. Venues were required to provide an accessible entrance and this one had steps. As a disabled person, I felt unwelcome in LGBTI venues and spaces, which were supposed to be inclusive and safe. At the time we were also experiencing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in education, workplaces, health services, public services and most aspects of society.

As a disabled LGBTI activist, I was fortunate to be supported by my trade union, UNISON, which recognised that the voices of Black and Disabled LGBTI people were not heard and were underrepresented in both the LGBTI and disability rights movements. UNISON's LGBT+ committee has reserved seats for disabled LGBT+ members and the national disability committee has reciprocal arrangements. My contribution is valued, and my voice heard as a disabled LGBTI person.

“Some disabled people are still being denied the right to form a family, and are often considered to be asexual or lack capacity to have consensual sexual and romantic relationships let alone be LGBTI.”

LOUISE ASHWORTH

What is your current goal as an activist?

Promoting the social and human rights models of disability which recognise people are not disabled by impairments or conditions but by barriers in society, education, workplaces, organisations, policies, accessing services and prejudiced attitudes.

Some disabled people are still being denied the right to form a family, and are often considered to be asexual or lacking in the capacity to have consensual sexual and romantic relationships let alone be LGBTI. My trade union activism includes campaigning and advocating on behalf of disabled workers to minimise barriers to employment, reasonable adjustments are provided, workplaces are accessible, and that disabled people receive a decent wage for the work they do.

In the UK, the [TUC's disability pay gap analysis](#) has revealed that disabled workers will be working from 9 November to the end of year for nothing. It is essential that any of the work we do on LGBTI or disability is done through an intersectional lens and we need to ensure that we look at the impact for different people within our movement — for example, black disabled people experience racism including structural racism, trans disabled people experience transphobia as well as disablism — and it is important that we look at how our different identities intersect.

What can LGBTI people personally do to make sure that people with disabilities are fully included in the movement and society at large?

It is important for LGBTI people to listen to disabled LGBTI people and make sure that we are included. There is a saying within the disability movement, 'Nothing about without us'. Historically we have been segregated and

institutionalised and denied independence. Some non-disabled people make assumptions about disabled people, but we are all different. Even those of us who have similar health conditions and impairments have different experiences.

“It is important for non-disabled LGBTI people to be allies to disabled LGBTI people by challenging prejudice and discrimination, supporting us in our demands, and listening to us.”

Louise Ashworth

Making assumptions results in disabled people not being treated as equals and negates the valuable contribution that we make. It is important for non-disabled LGBTI people to be allies to disabled LGBTI people by challenging prejudice and discrimination, supporting us in our demands, and listening to us. When organising events, even if they are virtual, try to make sure they are inclusive and accessible. Use appropriate language and respect individual LGBTI disabled people’s identities and contributions.

What’s your message for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities?

The theme this year is, ‘Fighting for rights in the post-COVID era’. It explores the challenges, barriers and opportunities for disabled people in the context of a global pandemic. Across Europe, we have all been impacted by the pandemic, but disabled people have been disproportionately impacted with higher death rates, reduced access to healthcare and support services, social isolation, poor mental health, financial impact and job losses. For disabled LGBTI people and black disabled LGBTI people, the impact was compounded due to marginalisation and structural racism and discrimination.

In some countries, there has been a shift. Disabled people were making some progress in respect of progressing social and human rights-based models of disability, but during the pandemic we were once again pathologised and medicalised, labelled as clinically vulnerable and denied life-saving treatment. This sent a message that we were expendable.

We need to learn from this and advocate for the human rights of disabled people and the removal of barriers that restrict our access to participation. We should build on some of the positives such as being able to virtually network and attend digital events that some disabled people would not have been able to access physically. At least one in five of us are disabled, so that means that there are many LGBTI people who will be disabled. Many of us have non-apparent impairments and conditions and we need to be advocating for the LGBTI movement to be inclusive and accessible for us all.