

What is Ableism?

A Plain English Guide

What is ableism?

Ableism is when disabled people are treated unfairly because of their disability. It is the assumption that some brains and bodies are superior to others.

It can happen because people make assumptions about what disabled people can or cannot do. It can also happen when buildings, services, workplaces, schools, or information are not designed to include everyone. They are designed for who is considered the " typical " person .

Ableism is not always deliberate. Sometimes people or organisations create barriers without meaning to. The result is still that disabled people are excluded or treated differently.

What does ableism look like?

Ableism can include:

- Not providing information in accessible formats.
- Holding meetings in places that wheelchair users cannot enter.
- Treating a disabled person on the wait list for social housing differently to a non disabled person (e.g people waiting longer because they may need support staff to live in their house)
- Assuming a disabled person cannot make their own decisions.
- Talking to a support worker instead of speaking directly to the disabled person.
- Refusing to make reasonable adjustments at work or in schools.
- Treating disabled people as inspirational simply for living their everyday lives.
- Using offensive language or jokes about disability.

Examples from Ireland

Here are some examples of ableism in an Irish context:

- A public building has steps but no working lift, so some people cannot access services.

- A GP surgery only allows appointments by phone, making it difficult for some Deaf people or people with speech impairments.
- A local authority consultation is only available in standard print and not in Easy Read, large print, audio, or accessible digital formats.
- An employer refuses reasonable workplace adjustments that would allow a disabled employee to do their job.
- A sports club says everyone is welcome but does not provide accessible changing rooms or accessible toilets.
- A festival advertises itself as inclusive but provides no information about accessibility, quiet spaces, or accessible viewing areas.

The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability says that people are disabled mainly by barriers in society, not by their impairment or health condition.

For example:

A wheelchair user is not disabled by using a wheelchair. They are disabled when a building only has stairs.

A person with dyslexia is not disabled by dyslexia alone. They are disabled when information is only available in one format and no reasonable adjustments are offered.

The social model encourages society to remove barriers so everyone can participate.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is an international human rights treaty.

Ireland ratified the Convention in 2018. It recognises that disabled people have the same human rights as everyone else and that governments should remove barriers that prevent full participation.

The Convention covers areas including:

- Equality and non-discrimination
- Accessibility
- Independent living



- Education
- Employment
- Health
- Participation in political and public life
- Access to justice

The Convention encourages governments, public bodies, employers, and communities to remove barriers and ensure disabled people can participate equally.

Why does this matter?

It matters that we understand this term in the same way as we understand other forms of discrimination like racism and sexism. If we understand it, we can call it out and call it what it is.

It's also important because some people may experience multiple, layered forms of discrimination based on their identities. For example a disabled Traveller may experience racism and ableism. Intersectionality is the idea that different parts of a person's identity—such as their race, gender, disability, sexuality, or class can overlap and shape the kinds of experiences they have.

Ableism can prevent disabled people from taking part in everyday life.

Removing barriers benefits everyone. Accessible buildings, clear information, flexible services, and inclusive attitudes help create a fairer society where everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Further information

Social Model of Disability

<https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/about-disability/social-model-of-disability/>

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD)

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

<https://www.ihrec.ie>