Ellen Spannagel

Hello, and welcome to Enabling Commons, a podcast at the McGill Centre for Human Rights & Legal Pluralism. Enabling Commons is a space for dialogue among persons with disabilities and their allies to explore strategies that will transform our environments, our commons, to be meaningfully enabling for all.

My name is Ellen Spannagel, and today, I'm joined by Dr. Yolanda Munoz, a co-investigator with the Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program or DICARP and Professor, I'm just wondering how you got involved with the DICARP program and why you started engaging with that work in the first place?

Yolanda Muñoz

Thank you very much for this opportunity of sharing my experience. I have been working as an external consultant for Global Greengrants Fund. That is an American donor that gives small grants to organizations working for the promotion of environmental justice. Over these years, we have found that there was not really any dialogue between the disability rights movement and the environmental justice movement. Disabilities considered are something that you do not see related to environmental justice, and at the same time, the agenda of people with disabilities has so many priorities, particularly, poverty reduction, access to education, access to the labor market, that they didn't see as an issue getting involved in environmental justice. We started producing knowledge and understanding why these two movements were so separated, and we started understanding all the gaps that people were not identifying. Also for myself, it was a learning curve because the subject is so new that even at the international level, it has not been addressed properly. I am very grateful for this opportunity of expanding on this issue that is so important and long overdue, involves new conversations. We have to build this dialogue.

Ellen Spannagel

Thank you so much for sharing that. You have worked in disability advocacy for a very long time. I'm not expecting you to share everything that's happened and all that you've learned, but I just want a little sneak peek as to your journey, how your professional career has changed, and then what this learning curve has been like for you, learning about climate justice as it also relates to disability justice?

Yolanda Muñoz

Well, my journey in disability rights started when I became disabled, almost three decades ago. When I acquired my disability, I am paraplegic, I have a spinal cord injury, when I first became disabled, I was very scared because I had no clue of what disability was. Thirty years ago, disability rights was just something that nobody talked about in Mexico because at that time, I lived in Mexico and, of course, there was no Internet, there was no social media, there was not even a language to refer to disability. Disability didn't exist in my vocabulary 30 years ago. For me, it was very interesting to start learning about disability rights, first, through the work that I was doing as coordinator of a community radio program in Mexico with indigenous communities. It was an eye opener because I continued my job in a wheelchair and I had to go to the mountain range in the wheelchair, and one day, I remember, I was in a very isolated community in Nayarit, and I was struggling because, of course, there is no paved roads, nothing, just nothing. I was struggling trying to push my wheelchair, and a person came to me and told me, "Why don't you just stand up and walk?" I told him, "Well, because I cannot walk." He told me, "Oh, I have a nephew that actually cannot walk, but he never leaves his home. Do you want to meet him?" I said, "Sure. Let's go." I went to visit this guy who was always in the floor or in his bed, and that never left home. When I left the house, there were like 30 persons outside telling me, "I also have someone at home who doesn't walk." I realized that by becoming a wheelchair user, I was able to open a door that was closed before to me because these people never leave their homes. They are extremely isolated. I started becoming more and more aware of the impact of poverty on people with disabilities because, of course, I was a privileged person with a disability. I had a wheelchair, I had a job, I had a family in Mexico, who was very supportive, and so that became the first eye opener. Simultaneously, I had the opportunity to meet, in therapy, people who had lived in the United States. They started introducing me to these concepts that were being developed in the US in the '90s, that it was not an individual problem, but a problem with social arrangements that legitimized the exclusion of a certain sector of the population, and that we had to work to fix the environment instead of working on fixing our bodies. Parallel to this, of course, I started doing other things because at that point, everything was on a volunteer basis. We were all volunteers. At some point, it became really very difficult for me to go back to the mountain range, so I decided to change paths and I started studying Master in Japanese Studies, but specialized in the indigenous peoples of Japan because I have always been shocked by racism. I think that in Mexico is one of the biggest problems that we have, racism. I wanted to continue that, but I couldn't do it in Mexico because it was physically impossible for me to go back and do 12 hours in a bus, it was really too demanding. So I decided to start studying these master specialized in the Ainu people of Northern Japan. I decided to focus on gender issues, on the situation of indigenous women in Japan. I started learning about racism and feminism, and doing parallels with what I was doing to promote a human rights approach in Mexico to the population with disabilities in my country. Everybody was very excited about these connections because, of course, I had the opportunity to understand how close racism and ableism work, I mean, the similarities. How society builds systems of power and operation in relation to certain groups and legitimizes that operation, saying that it is okay, that that's the way things are, and that it shouldn't be contested. This is how you create privileges where they don't exist. I started sharing with my friends of this course, and everybody was very excited about finally having a framework to discuss these things at a different level. I became some sort of a leader without really wanting to be a leader because I had so much in my plate also with the masters. But I started informing, and getting conferences, and advocating, and it became very empowering for all of us. Next, I had the opportunity to live in Japan and actually experience, for the first time in my life, how life was when you have rights. When you have the right to use the public transportation, when you have the right to an electric wheelchair, for example, not that I didn't have a wheelchair in Mexico, of course, no. But that, I don't know, it was so different. Access to the trains, I was able to use public transportation for the first time in a wheelchair in Japan. When I went back to Mexico, of course, I had a terrible cultural shock. In Mexico, you cannot move in public transportation. Everything has been very interconnected. For me, it has been very clear since the beginning that discrimination on the basis of disability doesn't come alone, that there is also sexism, there is also ageism, there is also classism, and all other forms of discrimination that act in such a way, they are so deeply intertwined, that they create very specific spaces of operation. However, if you try to include, for example, disability rights in the feminist agenda, they will tell you that it's not their field of work.

Yolanda Muñoz

I think that over the past 20 years, what I can tell you is that it has progressed a lot, and even if you see what has been happening at the international agenda, the issue of gender also was not part of disability rights until 1993. Despite the fact that there was a lot of evidence of the influence that the intersections of racism and ableism had in the chances of a person to successfully participate in the labor market, in education, or simply forming a family. You cannot know if you have been excluded from a certain position because you're a woman or because you're disabled or because you are aging or now that I have become an immigrant or because you're an immigrant. There are so many factors, but in the end, what needs to happen is that intersectionality needs to leave the realm of the theoretical point of view to become part of the work of organizations working in the field. However, if you are talking about people who barely leave their homes or who don't have access to education or to the labor market, it's very difficult for them to really move to that level, they are in survival mode. When you talk about environmental justice and people is starving, what they want is a job, what they want is a source of income, and it has been very, very complicated to make them understand that to get the job that they need, they first need to fight for their rights, that they need to know their rights, to defend them, instead of asking like, "Please give me a job, no matter what job, just give me a job or just give me food." After I completed my PhD, for me, it was very clear at that moment what needed to happen. Well, for several personal reasons, I fell in love with this adorable Quebecer that is my husband, and we made a decision of living here. I became an immigrant, as if I didn't have enough spaces of complicating my life. But when I became an immigrant, all my expertise as a specialist in the Ainu people and Japanese studies did not have any meaning at all in this specific context. So I decided to move where there were possibilities for me to develop my potential as a person, as an individual in general. What I had learned about gender and about disability for me was the obvious way, so I proposed to the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill to give this course. Well, things happened. I started teaching, I started participating in organizations here, in Quebec volunteering, in [inaudible] ,and in other groups, just trying to push the agenda of Feminist Studies to include disability rights. At some point, I had the opportunity to work for the Disability Rights Fund and I was in charge of the Latin-American grantees. In that specific job, we gave funding to organizations that were trying to promote the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities at the in-country level. I became very familiar with content of the convention and how it was related to law. Then what needed to happen at the in-country level to make sure that the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities will have an impact in the everyday life of people with disabilities. But unfortunately, the Latin-American portfolio was closed. Well, many things have happened in this very strange travel of negotiating with all the levels of my own identity and what I believe in. But one of these was and is currently environmental justice, and what I'm trying to share with this specific research project is all these experience, all these trial and errors, my successes, my failures, to advance the dialogue, to create a strategic partnerships between the environmental justice movement and the disability rights movement. Because this conversation needs to happen now, we cannot afford postponing it. What I have learned this far is that we need to produce knowledge for organizations of people with disabilities in the world and at the same time, for organizations working on the field of disability and environmental justice to actually understand why it is relevant to include disability as a concept because if they see disability as a group of people, they do not feel that the subject belongs to them, but if they understand that disability might be the result of environmental degradation, of overexploitation, of pollution, of the use of very aggressive agro-chemicals, then it becomes more relevant to them and they start understanding why it is important to learn about disability and also learn about ableism. Because the concept of ableism actually is not in the vocabulary of everybody.

Ellen Spannagel

I wanted to thank you for sharing how your perspective has changed, how you have grown, what you've learned, your experience in Japan, what you've taken coming back here. What has worked for you when you're trying to talk to other people about your whole experienced and about everything you have learned in making sure that that translates into the practices of organizations and how people communicate with people and engage with people, what are the strategies that have worked?

Yolanda Muñoz

Explaining and teaching people what is ableism and why we are reproducing these deeply ingrained prejudices in our everyday lives is crucial. What has been successful for me is to call them in instead of call them out. We have to help the new generations to behave differently through education, through explaining them that it is not natural that we are considered lesser kind of human being, that we are part of diversity and that they don't have to be afraid of the body's frailty and that having a disability doesn't make you less important or expendable. I think that that is something that needs to happen, particularly in the transition to a low carbon economy because if you see all the strategies that are being put into place, the policies, the privilege, the use of public transportation, the privilege walking, the privilege biking to, what if you cannot bike? What if you cannot walk more than 100 meters? What if you cannot use the public transportation? We have to advocate for accessible public transportation as part of an inclusive agenda of environmental justice. If the decision-makers are not taking into consideration at least 15 percent of the population that has a disability, your plan is going to be a failure and you are going to perpetuate the segregation of a very important part of the population. As a friend of mine always says, we are not an exclusive club. Everybody can join at any moment because it's part of life, it's part of the human experience. We have bodies that break, or we have bodies that fail, or we have bodies that acquire our chronic illness. What we are living is an excessive demand of participating, in very narrow terms, in the capitalist system of production of wealth, and if you cannot meet that criteria, you're out of the market. It should not be like that, we have to widen the scope of social participation, of inclusion in the community life. Thinking about a better future that does not include everyone is certainly not a better future because actually, these activists are building their own operation in the future. If you do not consider, for example, the relationship between ableism and ageism, that is a discrimination of old age, then you have scenarios as the one that we are having in long-term care facilities. Everywhere around the world, the people who have lived the most difficult part of this pandemic have been people who are institutionalized and sometimes against their will. We need, for example, to provide opportunities for independent living as part of a project where climate action becomes more profitable and where the quality of life of everyone will be better. When we fight for this opportunity of independent living, of access to public transportation, of access to education, we are actually fighting for climate action too,. We need effective inclusion in every policy related to climate action, meaningful inclusion, and not just an afterthought because that is what happens. Most of the time, and that has been my struggle practically in every forum that I tried to move, is that they say, "Hey, but here, you are included," and it's just like the basket where they put all the people that falls outside of the normality. These policies are actually excluding by particularizing how we experience in a different matter, climate action, environmental justice, and environmental degradation. Policies need to be drafted in a different manner where they meaningfully include people with disabilities. This is why, for example, when we talk about the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, we need to make sure that the in-country legislation will be in-line with the contents of this convention because it is comprehensive. But one of the problems that we have found in this specific project is that the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities only includes disaster risk readiness or disaster risk reduction, but not climate change. Although climate change might cause disaster, there is not like a proactive inclusion of people with disabilities in the projects and programs to avoid the consequences. Preparation plans, we are not included in preparation. People with disabilities are mentioned in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction only in terms of reconstruction, but not in terms of inclusion in planning and determining what needs to happen to make sure that the impact will be less brutal for everyone.

Ellen Spannagel

In these moments of having explain to these people and do work for people, and think about all these really exhausting things. What is joy for you?

Yolanda Muñoz

I have a problem. I'm passionate about this. I very much enjoy this quest of fighting and there is something that happens when you have a disability. You develop an incredible resistance to frustration. Because everything is frustrating, and you start like becoming more flexible. I think that at some point, yes, of course, it can be emotionally draining, particularly when people are not paying attention or they are just pretending that they are paying attention and they are not. But of course I choose my battles. The quest is so big that of course, it's not an individual issue. It has to be a collective effort, and I know that many people are fighting in different fronts, and we just get together and exchanges strategies. I think that we are all passionate about what we do. I think that my strategy is also to put some personal distance from the problem, understanding that a ableism is there, and that this is not an individual problem, but a social problem changes everything. I see it as social arrangements around body functions that need to change. If you make this paradigm shift from the individual problem of the disabled person through the social construction of the exclusion of people with disabilities in a systematic way, it does not become emotionally draining because it's not an emotional problem, it's a social problem, is a problem of social justice, and then it becomes liberating. On the contrary, I think that if I did not do anything, that would be really oppressive and sad for me. At the same time, I also know that many people choose not to identify as a person with a disability, because they have a lot of internalized ableism, and happens at some points, it can be very frustrating. For me, this is something like very much enjoy because I see the potential. I see for example, you young people moving forward saying, "Yes, let's fight racism, yes, let's fight ableism, yes, let's fight sexism, because we don't want this, we want a different world. That becomes something very exciting, very interesting, and a game changer. You have to do it with joy.

Ellen Spannagel

I really love how you explained it, about it being a social problem and not an individual problem. Thanks for sharing how you feel about that. I wanted to ask, what have you learned about creating meaningful inclusion?

Yolanda Muñoz

Meaningful inclusion. For me, meaningful inclusion here, and this specific context has happened in very concrete projects. In this specific field, I believe that the disability inclusive climate action research program can become a successful project to promote meaningful inclusion. Because we are trying to bring together a group of people who is passionate about environmental justice and climate action, both from the disability community and from the academic field and from NGOs working on environmental justice and climate change. I believe that this has a tremendous potential because there is no dialogue, because both groups are scared of each other. What I have found is that when you finally get to know each other, you find how enriching this dialogue can be. In terms of meaningful inclusion, I can quote very small projects here and there, mainly in Africa that are meaningfully including people with disabilities in decision-making processes. I also think that Canada in general could do better, in my opinion, what needs to happen is that we have to act collectively at the national level to support each other in the advocacy efforts at the provincial level with knowledge, with force, with the communication. Because I have seen in other countries, for example, in Peru, the adoption of the disability law. Wow, there was a lot of participation of organizations of people with disabilities in the pushing for the adoption, "We want it like this, and we want it really in line with the convention." They were so, so well informed and powerful and well-organized that they managed to produce one of the best laws that exist currently. But I am not sure that they are incorporating climate action in their current activities, because what needs to happen is that also learners need to be an important stake holder in all these. Because if you don't have money to do these, you are not going to do it, period. This is why I believe in the transformative power of human rights, donors who promote, who encourage organizations getting involved in human rights promotion instead of only palliative solutions like buying wheelchairs, that are also important, there are not many donors that are moving in that direction. In Canada in particular, it is very complicated. There are many small organizations that work with zero dollars or with a very limited budget, and there is really no cohesion at the national level aside from the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. But at the same time, participation is complicated because the conference is so big, Canada is one of the most complicated countries to do effective advocacy for the complexities of the federal and the provincial system. What I perceive is that if we managed to convince them that it is not to benefit a specific group of people but to include the subject of disability, instead of the group of people with disability. Include the subject in public policies, will make a difference, instead of making it like an individual problem of 15 percent of the population. You understand that this is an obligation of Canada as a state party of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of not discriminating anyone. This is coherent with the principles of the Canadian Charter on Human Rights. At the same time, I also think that people need to understand that they cannot really achieve social justice if they are excluding a very important sector of the population. I think that if we think of categories instead of groups, they will be more recent. So this is why it's a privilege to have access to this conversation with you and with everybody who wants to hear this. Also, this is why I love teaching, because it's my chance to say what I think and how I perceive the world, but also what I have learned together with other people who are in the same situation. Of course, people with disabilities are also diverse. Sometimes the only thing that we have in common is that we cannot walk. So this is why I think that disability should be a cross-cutting issue central to every policy. What needs to happen is that they learn about ableism and how incoherent it sounds, how empty it sounds. Every discourse on social justice that leave behind disability as a subject that does not belong.

Ellen Spannagel

Wow, how incoherent it sounds.

Yolanda Muñoz

Yeah, so empty. But the problem is that nobody knows about ableism. I think that what needs to happen, I mean my hope, is that people will start talking about it, that the new generations will learn about ableism, because, well, it's discrimination on the basis of disability. Yes, but it's also this unintended view that we are disposable. That, don't worry, it's okay, it's only people who have underlying conditions and the elderly will die. Wow, that has been the discourse that we have been hearing over the past nine months nonstop. That speaks volumes about our place in society and how poor their sense of social justice is. An incredible poverty of judgment. They feel so comfortable in these very strict measures of who deserves what, that they cannot do really meaningful changes in the structural forces that marginalize certain sectors of the population. My hope is that, for example, ableism starts making part of the education that every child will receive in elementary schools.

Ellen Spannagel

I've learned so much from this conversation. I feel really lucky to have taken so much of your time.

Yolanda Muñoz

Oh, on the contrary.

Ellen Spannagel

But is there anything else that you'd like to leave me with? To leave anybody who's engaging with this conversation with, a final message?

Yolanda Muñoz

I think that thinking about disability should not be considered a burden. I think that there is a lot of misconceptions about disability as something tragic, as something bad, as something sad, that our potential is minimal. For me, disability studies and learning about disabilities has been liberating, because it has taken the burden from my shoulders to put it in the social systems that legitimize the operation of everyone who is like me or that do not share the ideals of normalcy, the very narrow ideals of normalcy that should be contested. I do believe that as academic and as participant in these specific research program, we are in a privileged position to contest the systems of privilege and oppression and start taking away from the individual the idea that they are worthless. Because also many people with disabilities will internalize those ideas, life is not worthy, you cannot go out, you take too much space. So we do need to put an end to that. I think that education is liberating in many ways. I encourage the people who is listening to this to learn more about ableism and they will have a very interesting new perspective on how they have been told a lot of lies about what it means to have a disability.

Ellen Spannagel

I feel absolutely humbled to have listened to you for this long today Yolanda, and for learning a lot about the intersection between disability and climate justice. Then also just thinking about disability, period. So thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

Yolanda Muñoz

No. On the contrary, thank you very much for having me. It's always a privilege. I have tremendous faith in the youths, in the students, in the people who are going to build a better future for everyone. Not only the future, but the present, who are working very hard and just questioning, why discrimination exists. I do believe in the potential of new generation, in particular, to make a better world for everyone. We are at a key moment of the humankind, we cannot wait, we have to act now and we have to act together. So I feel very grateful for this opportunity.

Ellen Spannagel

Thank you for listening to Enabling Commons. Stay tuned for our next episode and take care.