

# UNDERSTANDING MODELS OF DISABILITY

This tip sheet will help you understand the different ways of thinking about disability.

Below you will find further information about the four main frameworks that people use to describe disability. These frameworks are known as the ‘models’ of disability. From an advocacy perspective, it is important to think about how these models can either limit or advance the rights of people with disability.

## The human rights model of disability

This model helps us understand disability based on basic human rights principles. The model explains the steps in which governments around the world must take to uphold, promote, and protect the rights of people with disability. The model exists because of an important international document called *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) it recognises that:

- Disability is a natural part of human diversity that must be respected and supported in all its forms
- People with disability have the same rights as everyone else in society
- Impairment must not be used as an excuse to deny or restrict people’s rights.

Of relevance to advocacy work alongside LGBTIQ+ people with disabilities is general comment #7 of the CRPD which sets out a range of recommendations for states to implement in order to affirm and respond to LGBTIQ+ human rights.

## Definitions

**Impairment:** A difference or loss of function arising from genetic factors, illness or injury.

**Disability:** An inability to take part in everyday activities on an equal basis with others due to barriers that exist because of mainstream society.

## The social model of disability

The social model played a key role in sparking disability rights movements in the USA, UK and Australia. This model argues that the issues people with disabilities face are created by a lack of access and discrimination and not because their bodies or mind are different. However, the social model does not acknowledge the very real impact of impairment in the lives of people with disability, such as chronic pain and shorter life expectancy.

The social model:

- Is primarily concerned with addressing barriers that are created by mainstream society
- It assumes that people with disability will be able to access the services they need once these barriers have been removed.

Even once these barriers have been removed, many people with disability will still need a range of impairment related supports in order to enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others. The barriers that exist in society are only one part of the puzzle.

## The medical model of disability

The medical model focuses purely on a person's impairment and sees the person with disability as the problem. It does not acknowledge the role society plays in limiting access and inclusion. The Medical model is based on two assumptions that have a dangerous impact on the human rights of people with disabilities.

- Firstly, it views people with disability as being incapable of performing tasks within a range that is through to be "normal"
- Secondly, it holds that disability can be used as an excuse to restrict or deny someone's rights and that people with disability are incapable of making important decisions about their lives

**The medical and charitable models of disability** are both inconsistent with human rights principles. As advocates, **we should aim to challenge these outdated methods** in all aspects of our work. But it is important to understand why.

## The charity model of disability

The charitable model is based on similar principles to those that underpin the medical model. It grew out of the emergence of charitable organisations that aimed to aid people with disability. While many charities did, and still do offer vital support, the charitable model compromises the rights of people with disability by:

- Portraying people with disability as being reliant on others and unable to do things for themselves
- Failing to recognise the views of people with disability as being valuable or essential
- Failing to recognise the role society plays in restricting access for people with disability

Relying on the good will of others to fund services for people with disability, rather than recognising personal support as a right that government has an obligation to support.

### Model summary

**Medical model** – Views people with disability as being broken and incapable of fitting into mainstream society.

**Charitable model** – Views people with disability as being vulnerable, and reliant on people without disability to perform certain tasks.

**Social model** – Asserts that the limitations experienced by people with disability are the result of inaccessible systems and processes in mainstream society.

**Human rights model** – Recognises that people with disability have the same rights as everyone else in society, and says that governments around the world have a role to play in upholding these rights.