

DISABILITY CITIZENSHIP IN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES: PROGRESS ACHIEVED AND CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME BY 2025

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of citizenship for people with disabilities in the European Union has experienced regulatory progress, driven by the ratification of the UN Convention. This article examines the main measures adopted in education, employment, universal accessibility, and political participation, highlighting the main challenges that remain. It also underscores the significant influence of the Spanish constitutional reform as an example of legal adaptation and the crucial importance of transnational cooperation to achieve real inclusion by 2025.

Keywords: Disability. Inclusion. Citizenship. European Union. Accessibility.

Introduction

The full recognition of the citizenship of persons with disabilities in the Member States of the European Union (EU) has, in recent decades, seen significant regulatory, social, and cultural progress. However, various obstacles of a legal, institutional, and attitudinal nature continue to hinder the achievement of genuine and effective equality, as proposed by both EU regulations and the legal systems of the Member States. The notion of disability, traditionally linked to purely medical or physical limitations, has been notably redefined in recent times, leaning toward a social and human rights-based approach that emphasizes the importance of the environment and the barriers that exist (DPEJ, 2023). In light of this conceptual transformation, the EU has laid the foundations of a legal and institutional framework aimed at

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promoting the inclusion and active participation of persons with disabilities, yet the challenges to be overcome by 2025 remain considerable (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

The definition of disability that is currently used from a European perspective stems from a holistic understanding, inspired by the social model, which identifies obstacles in social structures and built environments rather than focusing on individuals' physical, intellectual, or sensory impairments (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). Thus, when the Real Academia Española (RAE) describes disability as the “situación de la persona que, por razones físicas, mentales, intelectuales o sensoriales, previsiblemente permanentes, al interactuar con diversas barreras, puede ver impedida su participación plena y efectiva en la sociedad, en igualdad de condiciones con las demás” (DPEJ, 2023), it becomes clear that disability does not reside in the individual per se, but rather in the relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment. This starting point is essential for the formulation of public policies and the development of inclusive strategies within the European Union, whose guidelines are based on the need to guarantee not only formal equality but, above all, the material equality of rights and opportunities.

In this regard, the EU has a significant body of regulations that has been consolidated in recent years, closely linked to the commitment of Member States to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This treaty reinforces the concept that “las personas con discapacidad deben gozar de todos los derechos humanos y libertades fundamentales, en condiciones de igualdad con las demás” (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). Likewise, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Disability Strategy, and other community regulations on non-discrimination and accessibility reinforce the call to remove all types of barriers—physical, communicative, legal, or social (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Even so, legislative advances must be accompanied by profound changes in administrative practices and collective awareness, as a cutting-edge legal framework is of little use if there is no real transformation in the discriminatory structures that persist in everyday life.

In light of these regulatory developments, disability citizenship should be understood as that which is exercised, on equal terms, by bearing the rights and obligations

derived from belonging to a specific political community—in this case, the European Union or any of its Member States. However, the full exercise of this citizenship is hindered by difficulties across multiple spheres, such as education, health, employment, political participation, culture, or access to justice (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). Thus, even though directives on non-discrimination in employment have been implemented, the reality is that people with disabilities continue to face unemployment rates higher than average; in certain countries, job insecurity, part-time contracts, or segregation in specific work environments still make a difference (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). The challenge, therefore, is not only legal but fundamentally social, as it requires a change in mindset, structures, and values that allows persons with disabilities to integrate into all aspects of community life as full citizens (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

This holistic view of disability citizenship is grounded in the concept of universal accessibility, which encompasses areas as diverse as urban planning, technology and telecommunications, transport, and audiovisual communication. From a critical sociology perspective, addressing disability means asking questions about the distribution of power, the allocation of resources, and the reproduction of exclusionary systems (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Accessibility is not limited to removing architectural barriers; it calls for inclusive educational systems, labor policies adapted to diversity, reforms in the administration of justice, and, in general, a redesign of society so that no one is excluded (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). This proposal relates to the universal design paradigm, which states that products, environments, and programs should be built in such a way that anyone, regardless of their abilities or limitations, can benefit from them without the need for costly or stigmatizing subsequent adaptations (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024).

Now, looking ahead to 2025, the European Union faces challenges that demand urgent responses: first, the profound digital transformation accelerated by the post-pandemic context, which could widen exclusion gaps if accessibility needs are not addressed. Second, the necessity of ensuring the mainstreaming of the disability perspective in all public policies, since legislating in a single area—for example, employment—is of little use if health, education, or political participation remain based on segregated structures (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Third,

the harmonization of national legislations, a key factor to prevent the rights of persons with disabilities from varying drastically depending on the country of residence or the border crossed. Lastly, greater involvement is required from civil society actors—associations, local entities, businesses—because inclusion cannot depend solely on government action; it demands the active commitment of the entire community (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024).

Moreover, the social work perspective adds a critical dimension that underscores the need to view disability from an intersectional standpoint, taking into account factors such as gender, age, social class, or ethnic origin (GARCÍA-SANTESMASES FERNÁNDEZ; SANMIQUEL-MOLINERO, 2024). Thus, women with disabilities may experience double discrimination (as women and because of their disability), and there may be other overlapping vulnerabilities among migrants, older adults, or members of cultural minorities. This approach encourages a more complex analysis and the avoidance of simplistic solutions that overlook the internal diversity of the disability community and the often very different realities within it. Such an intersectional approach is especially relevant when one considers the existing heterogeneity in EU Member States—not only culturally and linguistically but also in terms of legal traditions, social protection models, or political frameworks.

In line with the above, the resilience of persons with disabilities in a digital and inclusive society becomes a central issue (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). Digitalization, which today affects almost all spheres of life, can open doors or close them definitively. On the one hand, information and communication technologies (ICT) and advances in artificial intelligence and social robotics can help compensate for certain functional or mobility limitations and therefore foster inclusion. On the other hand, if technology is not designed following universal accessibility criteria, there is a risk of broadening existing gaps, excluding persons with disabilities from digital interaction spaces and the knowledge-based economy (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). The EU, aware of this dilemma, has promoted standardization and regulatory frameworks to ensure that digital products and services are accessible; still, the practical implementation in each Member State faces resistance, so it is crucial to deepen supervision and effective compliance with these measures by 2025 (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023).

Furthermore, the political participation of persons with disabilities remains an area where difficulties abound. Although universal suffrage is recognized, the exercise of the right to vote and access to active political life continue to suffer practical barriers, such as inaccessible polling stations, lack of information in understandable formats, or the application of legal restrictions based on judicial incapacitation measures (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023). In this regard, the EU has proposed moving toward a model that guarantees the full range of political rights, but it requires a determined effort by States to review their legislation, ensure accessible voting methods, and train the professionals involved in electoral processes (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). Likewise, the symbolic dimension cannot be overlooked: the mere visibility of persons with disabilities occupying political representation positions (parliaments, local councils, governmental bodies) is a key step toward normalizing functional diversity in the public arena.

In this context, the contribution of the social sciences is increasingly necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, as well as the role of institutions and social interactions in shaping disability citizenship (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Sociology, political science, social psychology, or social work provide analytical tools to evaluate public policies and propose improvements that meet the real needs of persons with disabilities (GARCÍA-SANTESMASES FERNÁNDEZ; SANMIQUEL-MOLINERO, 2024). Similarly, international cooperation and networks of civil society organizations play an essential role in ensuring that rights are effectively upheld: exchanging best practices, adapting successful models, and harmonizing criteria are processes that facilitate the consolidation of an inclusive European citizenship.

Ultimately, the EU faces the challenge of giving full meaning to the citizenship of persons with disabilities, which calls for cross-cutting public policies, a suitable regulatory framework, and, above all, a cultural shift that acknowledges functional diversity as a constituent part of the social fabric (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). The recent reform of Article 49 of the Spanish Constitution is merely one illustrative example of the adaptation processes taking place within Member States; nevertheless, there remains a long road ahead to translate equal rights and non-discrimination into tangible realities. In 2025, the European Union must reassess the extent to which it has fulfilled its commitments in this area, advancing in the elimination of the barriers that still

restrict the participation of persons with disabilities in vital areas such as employment, education, politics, or culture (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

Taking on this undertaking seriously entails not only the deployment of financial resources but also the active involvement of society as a whole. It requires broadening perspectives on disability, deconstructing prejudices, and fostering training and awareness-raising spaces that, starting from formal and non-formal education, transform how persons with disabilities are viewed in the collective imagination (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). In addition, it involves persons with disabilities themselves, who must play a leading role in defining and evaluating the policies that affect them, asserting their right to self-determination and decision-making in matters that concern their lives (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023). Only in this way can the ideal of a truly inclusive Europe become a reality.

Consequently, this article proposes a critical and multidisciplinary approach to disability citizenship in the EU Member States, addressing both the main achievements and the pending challenges as we move toward 2025. First, it will present an overview of the legislative developments and conceptual changes that have shaped inclusive policies. It will then explore the practical obstacles that persist, highlighting the importance of mainstreaming, intersectionality, and universal accessibility. Lastly, it will set out future perspectives and recommendations which, in light of European and international requirements, could guide the Union toward truly full citizenship for all persons with disabilities.

Addressing the Issue.

1. The Evolution of the Concept of Disability Citizenship in the European Union

Regulatory and institutional developments on disability citizenship in the European Union (EU) have been shaped by a paradigm shift that interprets disability from a human rights

perspective rather than solely from a medical point of view. Initially, European laws focused on protection and assistance, viewing persons with disabilities as objects of care and relegating them to welfare-oriented policies (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). However, the signing and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by the EU and its Member States marked a turning point, as it established the idea that disability should be analyzed according to the barriers imposed by the environment on the participation of these individuals.

This new approach is aligned with the definition of the Real Academia Española, which recognizes disability as the result of the interaction between the individual and their surroundings (DPEJ, 2023). In practice, this means that disability is not viewed exclusively as an individual deficit but rather as the consequence of limitations imposed by society. Furthermore, European regulations have been articulated to ensure equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and universal accessibility. Similarly, specific directives have been developed to eliminate any form of discrimination in employment, training, social protection, and other key areas (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023).

The concept of disability citizenship also points to political and civic participation on equal terms, that is, the right to vote, be elected, and take part in public life (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023). However, achieving this ideal requires not only a robust legal framework but also a cultural shift that acknowledges functional diversity as an inherent element of the entire citizenry. Today, the EU promotes this shift through awareness-raising and training strategies aimed at deconstructing stereotypes and facilitating the integration of persons with disabilities in all areas of social life. The trajectory followed in recent years highlights significant achievements but also reveals numerous barriers still in place and the need to implement more effective policies in the run-up to 2025 (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024).

2. Main Regulatory Achievements and Their Practical Application

One of the EU's most notable successes in the area of disability citizenship has been the establishment of a common legal framework to guide the action of Member States. This process began with the adoption of Directive 2000/78/EC, which laid down a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Thanks to this directive, protection mechanisms against disability-based discrimination in the workplace were strengthened, including clauses on job adjustments and the need for reasonable accommodations to ensure the full integration of persons with disabilities.

In parallel, the European Disability Strategy 2010–2020, and its successor for the 2021–2030 period, represented a major turning point, as they focused on critical areas: accessibility, participation, equality, employment, education and training, social protection, health, and the EU's external action (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). These strategies aligned with the CRPD, signed by the Union in 2007 and ratified in 2011, making it the first regional integration organization to formally commit to that international instrument (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

The impact of these achievements is evident in the enactment of more advanced national laws in various Member States. Many have consolidated legal measures protecting persons with disabilities against any discriminatory act and have promoted specific plans to guarantee equality in access to education, vocational training, and independent living (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). For example, in Spain, the modification of Article 49 of the Constitution—still underway—seeks to align the constitutional text with the new paradigm, replacing the reference to “disminuidos físicos, sensoriales y psíquicos” with terminology that is more respectful and in accordance with the CRPD (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023).

Moreover, the development of community-level policies has encouraged transnational cooperation and the exchange of best practices among countries, which has made it possible to implement innovative initiatives, such as digital employability programs for persons with disabilities, or the adoption of cutting-edge assistive technologies (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). These efforts indicate undeniable progress in building effective disability citizenship, as EU funding and

multinational projects have supported the creation of support networks and promoted infrastructural changes in urban, transportation, and communication settings.

3. Progress in Universal Accessibility and Its Cross-Cutting Relevance

Universal accessibility is one of the fundamental pillars of disability citizenship, given that its scope affects areas as diverse as education, culture, transport, political participation, and private life. From the EU perspective, regulations and directives have been issued to standardize accessibility criteria, covering public buildings, transport systems, and the websites of official bodies (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). This legal standardization aims to avoid regulatory gaps between States and lay the foundations for an inclusive common space.

Likewise, concrete initiatives have been promoted, such as grants for home adaptations or requirements for accessibility in public procurement processes (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Such measures have led companies and administrations to embrace a dynamic of social responsibility, promoting universal design and removing structural barriers. In fact, the idea of “design for all” has become central to the European agenda, emphasizing that products and services must be conceived from the outset to be usable by as many people as possible, regardless of age or disability (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024).

Regarding the digital dimension, Directive (EU) 2016/2102 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile apps of public-sector bodies represents a major step forward. Many Member States have incorporated and expanded these provisions, extending accessibility obligations to the private sphere, especially in large companies or essential service portals (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). This has encouraged the creation of web content that meets international standards (e.g., WCAG 2.1) and the adoption of technologies such as screen readers or video subtitles. However, there are still challenges in the digital sphere, especially concerning the implementation of accessibility in small- and medium-sized

businesses, as well as the spread of an accessibility culture among developers and content managers online (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024).

4. Inclusive Education and Employability: Achievements and Challenges

Ensuring access to a quality, inclusive education is a key element for disability citizenship, as it determines opportunities for personal, professional, and social development. The EU has encouraged programs that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, establishing measures such as the adaptation of materials and resources, the removal of architectural barriers, and specialized teacher training (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). This approach seeks not only to avoid school segregation but also to normalize coexistence in diversity.

In practice, countries such as Sweden, Denmark, or the Netherlands have led inclusive education models, inspiring reforms in other Member States. Flexible curricula, participatory methodologies, and individualized support systems have been developed (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Moreover, reinforcing teacher training and involving the educational community make it easier to identify each student's needs, preventing school failure and fostering continuity into higher levels of education. Nevertheless, in some contexts, segregated centers or inadequate resources for attending to functional diversity still predominate, limiting the principle of educational equity (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024).

In terms of employment, European guidelines have prompted Member States to adopt affirmative action policies, tax incentives for recruitment, and professional training programs for persons with disabilities. Quotas have thus been created for public and private sector companies, and grants have been established for adapting jobs (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). According to data published in various reports, the employment rate of persons with disabilities has increased in some EU countries, especially in those that have invested in training and job placement services (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

Even so, the employment gap persists: persons with disabilities continue to record unemployment rates significantly higher than the general population. Job insecurity and

temporary employment are also ongoing challenges, aggravated by a lack of awareness in some economic sectors about the added value of diversity (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). By 2025, the EU aims to consolidate professional guidance networks and strengthen inclusive employment policies, but a collective effort from employers, unions, third-sector entities, and public administrations is required to achieve real and sustained progress.

5. Political and Social Participation: Advances in Building Full Citizenship

Participation in public life is a key indicator of citizenship. For persons with disabilities, the legal recognition of the right to vote and to be elected has been a substantive step in most EU countries (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023). However, simply removing legal restrictions is not enough; ensuring the accessibility of electoral processes, the adaptation of documentation, and the training of election officials is indispensable (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

Some Member States have launched very positive initiatives, such as issuing easy-to-read electoral guides and providing personalized assistance at polling stations. There have also been pilot tests with accessible electronic voting systems (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). These actions have increased voter turnout among persons with disabilities and made their political involvement more visible. Nonetheless, difficulties remain in guaranteeing the accessibility of electoral environments, and in certain countries, there are still systems that limit the right to vote for individuals under support or guardianship measures, which conflicts with the CRPD (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024).

On the other hand, social participation is not limited to the electoral arena. Full citizenship also involves the ability to engage in civil society organizations, unions, neighborhood associations, or cultural entities. The EU has supported policies to encourage such participation by funding leadership initiatives, promoting consultative forums, and including disability representatives in decision-making bodies (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). The advocacy efforts of disability organizations have contributed to monitoring compliance with regulations and proposing legislative improvements. However, there are barriers ranging from inaccessible buildings to the lack of

training in adaptive technologies, limiting many persons with disabilities from fully engaging in community and civic life (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

6. Digitalization as an Opportunity and a Challenge for Inclusion

Today, digital transformation is becoming increasingly significant, affecting most aspects of daily life. For persons with disabilities, technology can become a true ally in facilitating communication, information access, and personal autonomy (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). For instance, voice recognition mobile apps enable the inclusion of individuals with motor or visual difficulties, and sign language video interpretation systems support the full inclusion of deaf people. In addition, the rise of artificial intelligence opens the door to personalized solutions that, applied ethically, can improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities.

The EU, aware of this reality, has legislated to ensure that technological development incorporates accessibility principles from the design stage. One clear example is the aforementioned Web Accessibility Directive, as well as rules on e-commerce and personal data protection (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). Meanwhile, funding programs like Horizon Europe have promoted research projects in assistive technologies and inclusive solutions.

Nonetheless, the digital divide poses a looming threat. Many persons with disabilities do not have the equipment or the knowledge to benefit from these tools, which raises the risk of exclusion in an increasingly digitalized context (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Moreover, not all developers and online service providers adhere to accessibility guidelines, and oversight and enforcement mechanisms remain insufficiently robust in some Member States. Therefore, one of the major challenges for 2025 is achieving digital literacy for all ages and disability profiles, generating equitable conditions of access to technology.

7. Intersectionality and Multiple Vulnerability: The Role of Gender and Other Factors

The population with disabilities is not homogeneous, and within it, certain individuals face multiple or intersectional forms of discrimination (GARCÍA-SANTESMASES FERNÁNDEZ; SANMIQUEL-MOLINERO, 2024). In this sense, the EU has recognized that women with disabilities may be affected by gender inequality and by the barriers stemming from their disability, translating into greater difficulties in job placement, education, or access to justice. Similarly, migrant persons with disabilities encounter linguistic, cultural, and legal barriers that complicate their full social inclusion.

An intersectional perspective calls for public policies that address the various dimensions involved in exclusion, thus avoiding fragmented approaches. Some Member States have started implementing specific plans for women with disabilities, offering psychological support resources, career counseling, and protection against gender-based violence. Likewise, initiatives have been developed for the inclusion of older adults with disabilities, addressing issues like dependency and unwanted loneliness (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024).

Even so, the incorporation of intersectionality into all EU policies remains in its early stages. Many social protection mechanisms or inclusion programs do not differentiate by gender, age, or origin, limiting their real impact (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Overcoming this challenge implies a shift in mindset and the training of those professionals who design and manage such programs, ensuring that the needs of each specific group are properly considered. Moreover, ongoing awareness efforts and monitoring are needed so that measures do not end up being mere statements on paper but effective tools that guarantee equal opportunities for all persons with disabilities, regardless of their circumstances.

8. Reform of Article 49 of the Spanish Constitution: A Paradigmatic Example

Spain, as one of the EU Member States, stands out for its legislative framework on disability, which includes pioneering laws in areas like dependency, personal autonomy, and employment inclusion. In this context, the reform of Article 49 of the Constitution has been proposed to adapt the text to the terminology and principles of the CRPD (SINOPSIS ART. 49

CE, 2023). It aims to replace the language of “disminuidos físicos, sensoriales y psíquicos” with expressions that fully acknowledge the dignity and rights of persons with disabilities, as well as emphasize the obligation of public authorities to guarantee their real inclusion.

However, this reform process has not been free from controversy. Some voices argue that the constitutional amendment should go beyond a mere terminological change, demanding the adoption of a transversal rights-based approach and the revision of other articles that may limit the full exercise of citizenship (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). Moreover, some stress the need for broad parliamentary and social debate to reach consensus on the practical implications of the reform, avoiding the adoption of a merely symbolic text.

Nonetheless, the Spanish case serves as an example to illustrate the willingness to align domestic law with European and international standards in the area of disability (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). The reform of Article 49 could set a precedent not only in Spain but also in other EU countries that, although they have advanced legislation, may not always have constitutional provisions that establish the social model of disability.

9. Civil Society’s Response and the Importance of Self-Management

A decisive factor for the success of inclusive policies in the EU has been the active role of organizations of persons with disabilities. Local, national, and European groups have worked together to highlight demands, advise legislators, and oversee the enforcement of regulations (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). These networks, many of them partially funded by European funds, have launched awareness campaigns, leadership training programs, and transnational collaboration platforms that facilitate the exchange of experiences.

Self-management emerges here as a fundamental element of disability citizenship. It refers to the capacity of persons with disabilities themselves to participate in decision-making that affects their lives and to exercise control over the support resources they receive (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). In some Member States, personal budget or

personalized assistance programs have been implemented, allowing individuals to choose who, when, and how they receive the support needed for independent living. This form of organization reinforces autonomy and empowers the community, breaking away from the paternalistic vision that has historically characterized disability care.

Nevertheless, the capacity of civil society to participate also depends on access to decision-making spaces and information. For instance, it is not always easy for local grassroots organizations to participate in European-level debates or influence national policies, especially if they lack sufficient financial resources or if communication barriers remain unaddressed (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Hence the need to strengthen cooperation networks and establish clear mechanisms of participation so that civil society's contributions are not relegated to a merely consultative role.

10. Future Challenges in Policy Harmonization and Supervision of Compliance

Despite the progress achieved, one of the greatest challenges the EU faces in disability matters is the harmonization of different national policies and legislation. Although there is a common framework, each Member State can implement directives and regulations in its own way, depending on its particular context. As a result, there are disparities in the level of protection and in how effectively persons with disabilities' rights are upheld, depending on the country in which they reside (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023).

To address this situation, the European Commission has strengthened evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, but more progress is needed in enforcing actual compliance. Thus far, tools such as inclusion indicators have been developed, and comparative reports have been carried out to gauge the degree of CRPD implementation (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Even so, the enforcement of sanctions or the adoption of decisive measures in cases of noncompliance remains limited in practice, as the EU must reconcile the principle of subsidiarity with the States' authority to legislate in the social sphere.

Additionally, the economic and social crisis brought on by the pandemic has revealed the fragility of certain social protection systems, which experienced budget cuts in key

areas for the inclusion of persons with disabilities (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). Looking ahead to 2025, it will be essential to reinforce funding for European and national programs that promote accessibility, job training, and social protection, and to ensure that there is no rollback of the rights achieved.

11. The Cultural Challenge: Overcoming Stereotypes and Prejudices

Laws and public policies are indispensable but insufficient if there is no profound cultural change to eradicate deeply rooted societal prejudices. Even today, persons with disabilities contend with paternalistic attitudes, infantilization, and the denial of their abilities and contributions (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024). These perceptions create psychological and relational barriers that hinder inclusion, regardless of the fact that the law prohibits discrimination.

In this sense, education and public awareness are key factors. Awareness programs, media campaigns, and the introduction of diversity content in school curricula help normalize the presence of persons with disabilities in all areas (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Likewise, access to culture, sports, and leisure activities plays a fundamental role in building a positive social image, allowing the public to see that disability is not synonymous with inactivity or dependence, but rather another facet of human reality (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024).

Conversely, social media and the Internet can provide opportunities for visibility, but they can also spread hate speech or ridicule, reinforcing stigma. Therefore, a coordinated approach is crucial, involving the education sector, the media, and competent authorities to share success stories, promote equality, and sanction discriminatory behavior (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). In this way, society can advance toward a place where difference is celebrated and respected, instead of marginalized.

Conclusions

The current landscape of disability citizenship in the European Union (EU) reflects a solid regulatory framework and a growing institutional commitment aimed at overcoming the barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from exercising their rights on an equal footing. As noted, the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the legislative developments it has spurred have led to a new approach based on dignity, autonomy, and universal accessibility (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). Even so, practical reality shows that obstacles and resistance still exist, hindering the effective implementation of these norms and principles.

On one hand, the adoption of European directives and strategies related to non-discrimination and universal design has led to significant progress in areas such as education, employment, and political participation. In this regard, the strengthening of inclusive education models, the establishment of hiring quotas in certain countries, or the growing obligation to ensure accessible environments have resulted in considerable improvements for persons with disabilities (PERSONAS CON DISCAPACIDAD, 2023). However, these improvements are not uniformly distributed across all Member States, whether due to differences in available resources or the lack of strict uniformity in transposing directives into domestic law (CALAZA LÓPEZ; MORETÓN SANZ; RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, 2024).

On the other hand, the effective participation of persons with disabilities in public and social life remains a pending challenge. Despite significant progress in lifting legal restrictions on voting, shortcomings persist in the accessibility of electoral processes and the adaptation of information directed at the public (SINOPSIS ART. 49 CE, 2023). In addition, while the consolidation of the digital dimension undeniably offers opportunities, it also carries the risk of widening the exclusion gap. Many technological resources are designed without accessibility considerations or suffer from a lack of digital literacy, preventing part of the population with disabilities from fully benefiting from these tools (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024).

In this context, the reform of Article 49 of the Spanish Constitution serves as an illustrative example of the intent to adapt legal systems to the new terminology and principles

of the CRPD, highlighting that legal transformations, in turn, require deeper social and cultural changes (TRABAJO SOCIAL Y DISCAPACIDAD, 2024). Likewise, the explicit recognition of disability as an intersectional matter—where factors such as gender, age, or origin can heighten vulnerability—urges institutions and civil society to deepen their contextualized policies and programs (GARCÍA-SANTESMASES FERNÁNDEZ; SANMIQUEL-MOLINERO, 2024).

Ultimately, the EU must continue strengthening cooperation among its members and setting ambitious goals for 2025 in order to ensure the effective protection of disability citizenship and implement the commitments acquired through the CRPD and the community guidelines. To achieve this, it will be necessary to foster training and awareness among various stakeholders—both public and private—as well as to carry out detailed oversight of the measures taken, so that sanctions for noncompliance are real and not merely symbolic (SÁNCHEZ-ORO, 2024). In addition, the active role of civil society, structured around associations and organizations of persons with disabilities, will remain essential for pushing, evaluating, and proposing new initiatives that translate the letter of the law into concrete action. Only then can progress be made toward a fully recognized disability citizenship in which functional diversity ceases to be a factor of exclusion and becomes a source of social enrichment.

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