

Experiences of structural discrimination

**Ministry of Justice:
Workshop results**

**Forms of structural
discrimination
– summary**



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Experiences of structural discrimination are spread over the life cycle, starting from childhood and adolescence and continuing into adulthood and old age.

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This information leaflet presents experiences of structural discrimination among people belonging to an ethnic minority, people with a migrant background, LGBTIQ people and people with disabilities. The experiences were discussed in workshops on the topic in summer 2022, which were organised as part of the Know Equality EU project coordinated by the Ministry of Justice.

The compilation has been prepared to raise awareness and understanding of the structures behind societal problems, instead of seeing problems as dependent on the individual.

The ideas presented in the summary are not those of the author or the Ministry of Justice, but of the participants in the workshops.

Childhood and adolescence

The key structures and services of childhood and adolescence include education, social welfare and health care services, child welfare services and hobbies. The structural discrimination in them differs by minority group.

- Among social welfare and health care services, child health clinics in particular are very important for the early stages of children's development. The child health clinic has challenges in identifying and responding to the needs of **children with disabilities**. This is particularly emphasised for children with hearing impairments. Furthermore, the child health clinic does not know much about **intersex children** and the negative effects of medical measures performed on them.
- It may be difficult to get involved in hobbies if they do not take into account and support the diversity of children and young people, both in terms of language and support needs and in terms of gender expression.
- Structural discrimination in education manifests itself through teaching, practices and study counselling. It is especially important to children and youth belonging to ethnic minorities, how multiculturalism and diversity are taught at school, as it affects the formation of identity.
- The teacher has a significant impact on the child or young person's feeling of being part of the group. If a child is disappointed in the teacher or other adult at school, the child's trust in adults may decrease.

It is important for teachers and others working with children to undergo training on antiracism and to learn to examine their own attitudes.

A child may have unidentified learning difficulties, which may lead to negative feelings about their own abilities. In other words, efforts must also be made to identify learning difficulties.

- In the case of **LGBTIQ children and youth**, the deficiencies in teaching are particularly emphasised in terms of information about them. Diversity of sexuality and gender is not taken into account or addressed in teaching, for example in connection with sexual health education and physical education lessons
- Rigid school systems make it difficult to recognise a pupil's or student's gender identity and to use their preferred name. Children or youth often have to train school staff themselves on the subject.
- There is a particular risk that **LGBTIQ children and youth** belonging to a religious minority will not receive the information and support they need.
- The needs of **children and youth with disabilities** are not recognised in education, and their learning is not supported. There is a great deal of variation between schools in how the support measures needed by the child or young person are implemented. Learning materials are not always accessible, and personal help is not always available.
- The failure to satisfy the needs of children who use sign language and autistic children is emphasised in particular, for example, in learning sign language and the sensory accessibility of the built environment. A child may have to attend home education because the school does not provide the necessary support, and sometimes schools even encourage families to do so.

Educational transitions are critical moments when a child or young person may experience structural discrimination. The timing of transitions in adolescence increases the impact of experienced discrimination on the development and future of children and youth. This is particularly evident through study counselling, whereby the young person is directed to the next level of education and thus to working life.

- A **young person belonging to an ethnic minority** can internalise what society says about their study and employment opportunities instead of following their own dreams. This affects what they aim to study and what their study and employment opportunities are in general.

- The transition from education to working life also involves structural discrimination. For example, because of racism, the same educational background does not guarantee the same employment opportunities for a young person belonging to an ethnic minority as for a young person belonging to the majority population. Instead, they may end up working in a low-paid sector that does not correspond to their education.
- In the case of **LGBTIQ youth**, study counselling and vocational guidance are highly gendered, which in turn leads to narrow study and employment choices. The assumption of a person's cisnormativity and heteronormativity is emphasised in the application processes for places of study and workplaces, which is why a young LGBTIQ person may fear being discriminated against at the application stage and when entering education or working life.
- In the case of a young person belonging to a gender minority, they may be afraid of the wrong gender marker being shown, if it has not been updated in all the official certificates and forms needed in the application process. The information provided in official certificates has a major impact on how a person is identified and accepted.
- **Youth with disabilities**, on the other hand, are often directed to day activities after comprehensive school, instead of upper secondary education. Such guidance inevitably affects their employment opportunities, because day activities, unlike upper secondary education, do not have careers counselling. In addition, their abilities and their career dreams and opportunities will not be examined.
- If a disabled teenager is admitted to a special vocational institution, there is no certainty as to whether the education completed there will be taken seriously in the labour market. On the other hand, if a young disabled person strives for other higher education studies, they may experience discrimination in terms of the prerequisites for the training course and the entrance examination and a lack of support in the actual studies. For example, they may need interpretation services when applying for studies and/or during studies, but this is not necessarily arranged for them.
- The opportunities for further education for people with disabilities are very limited, and higher education is found to have conflicting effects on their employment: on the one hand, it can increase employment, but on the other hand, people with disabilities also experience long-term unemployment despite higher education.

There are other structural factors affecting particularly **children and youth with disabilities** and their families.

- Access to special equipment is difficult, and basic services are inadequate, which in turn may lead to more serious problems and situations, such as resorting to child welfare.
- Children and youth with disabilities are expected to depend more on their parents than able-bodied ones do, which leads to dependence and being under continuous control. In addition, they experience challenges related to housing and moving due to the limited nature of forms of housing and services. For example, sheltered housing does not have enough staff and there is no certainty as to how a relationship or family life can be maintained in them.
- Dependence both on parents and on administrative decisions and other external parties affects the independence of children and youth. They also feel that police officers do not know how to deal with people with disabilities.

Structural discrimination affects children and youth belonging to these minority groups in many ways. It creates experiences of exclusion and deprivation, which can have a negative impact on the self-esteem and identity of children and youth. Such a negative self-image, on the other hand, can lead to underachievement, which has a negative impact on both education and employment opportunities. In addition to these, structural discrimination has a negative impact on mental health and thus increases the feeling of being unwell.

Structural discrimination also endangers the **family life of people with disabilities** in many ways.

- In particular, the continuous need to describe and justify assistance needs and the lack of response due to missing or inadequate services put a strain on the family's everyday life.
 - There are obstacles between family services and services for disabled people, and family services are not very receptive to families with disabled children.
 - Parents may have to resign from work so that they can support their child, which negatively affects the family's financial situation. In some cases, especially for those on the autism spectrum, the child may be placed outside the home.
 - In divorce situations, the child's wishes are not taken into account; for example, the services needed by the child can be found in the residential area of one parent but not the other. Disabled children and youth and their families are constantly facing the negative attitudes of society towards them.

Adulthood and old age

Social welfare and health care services are also central in adulthood and old age, and employment services and the labour market in particular play a key role in the lives of working-age adults. Structural discrimination in these structures and services is repeated among different minority groups and differs between them.

- A contribution to the accessibility of social welfare and health care services and the provision of information on them must be made from the perspective of both **people with disabilities and foreign-language speakers**, since it is not possible to search for and obtain the services they need without smooth, multi-channel communication.
- In particular, attention must be paid to the accessibility and development of digital services.
- In social welfare and health care services, the understanding of religious and cultural differences and their impacts on the provision and reception of services should also be increased. For example, different cultures or religions may have different perceptions and needs regarding physical and psychological health, which may affect the person's approach to the services and treatments they need.
- Stereotypes and expectations regarding some **ethnic minorities and people with migrant backgrounds** may have a negative impact on whether the person is able to seek and receive the help they need, for example, for health problems and domestic issues.

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Discriminatory attitudes and structures cause minority stress, which means that a person belonging to a minority must constantly take stereotypes into account, challenge them and avoid reproducing them.

The child health clinic and other support services for parents and families have challenges in identifying and supporting both **LGBTIQ and disabled parents**.

- Heteronormativity and, in particular, cisnormativity in the services discriminate against LGBTIQ parents. **People belonging to a gender minority** do not have equal opportunities to start a family compared to cisgender people, and their gender identity may not be taken into account when they are encountered as a parent.
- Many family and close relationships are not recognised, nor are people daring to seek help for problems in these relationships, as there are fears that the problems are interpreted as being caused by their sexuality or gender and not by other factors.
- Furthermore, public services provide little support for **people with disabilities** to start a family. The parenthood of people with disabilities may be called into question repeatedly in different areas of society. This is manifested, among other things, in unnecessary child welfare notifications made about parents with disabilities and the obstacles at schools, which makes it difficult for parents to participate in their child's school attendance.

In addition to child health clinics and family services, there are also other services and structural issues that concern **people with disabilities** in particular.

- It is a significant problem that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is not known or complied with, which means that the rights of people with disabilities are not realised either. This affects their ability to lead an independent life at all stages of their lives.
- Services needed by people with disabilities include personal assistants, therapists, transport services and renovation work, but these are not sufficiently available.
- Investments must be made in the accessibility of the built facilities in general, so that people with disabilities can participate in different public events, for example.
- Safety-related services must be developed and increased, taking into account accessibility, so that people with disabilities can request and receive help in emergencies.

Structural discrimination prevailing in working life is manifested in many different ways and especially in the transitions of working life, such as the job seeking process. Both people with **disabilities, those belonging to ethnic minorities, and those with a migrant background** have difficulties in being hired for work that corresponds to their education.

- A particular problem is that higher education received elsewhere by a **person with a migrant background** is not appreciated in Finland. Either they must retrain in Finland, or they are directed to low-paid sectors, such as care and cleaning, regardless of their interest and competence. This, in turn, maintains the inequality between different population groups.
- Economic uncertainty and unemployment can lead to a person belonging to an **ethnic minority or with a migrant background** being dependent on their employed spouse and not accruing a pension, so they experience poverty even in their old age.
- The uncertain economic situation has a negative impact on the family and the possibilities of starting a family. Structural discrimination can be inherited from generation to generation in the form of poor study and employment opportunities.

In the case of **LGBTIQ people**, structural discrimination is manifested through the prevalent cisnormativity and heteronormativity in working life.

- When searching for employment and being employed, it is necessary to return to the closet, i.e. hide their LGBTIQ status in order to avoid discrimination. The minority stress resulting from this is reflected in the feeling that they must be careful all the time.
- The possibility of discrimination is particularly emphasised for people belonging to a gender minority in situations where their wrong gender status is revealed, for example, through employment certificates.
- LGBTIQ employees also feel uncertain about whether their company supports parental leave. This would be particularly important in order to build a care relationship between all the parties involved in the LGBTIQ family.

Structural discrimination against **people with disabilities** in working life is manifested as a lack of support and a lack of attention to special needs.

- For example, Employment and Economic Development (TE) Centres may not know how to help disabled jobseekers, and it is difficult to obtain support services such as an interpreter for a job interview.

- A person may not be invited to a job interview if their disability is indicated in the job application, as employers doubt the competence and skills of the disabled person. Both finding employment and becoming unemployed involve their own forms of discrimination.
- The challenges related to work include accessibility at the workplace, insufficient pay and organising commuting.
- The need for support for people with disabilities is further emphasised if they are made redundant, as unemployment increases the risk of exclusion and poverty.
- The fact that the labour force offered by people with disabilities is not used despite labour shortages reveals the deep-seated structural discrimination against them in the labour market.

Structural discrimination experienced in old age manifests as invisibility for both **LGBTIQ and disabled people**, meaning that they and their needs are not recognised.

- **Elderly LGBTIQ people** may no longer be able to fight the discrimination against them, whereas older people with disabilities are no longer offered the services they need. For example, an interpretation service is not necessarily provided in an old people's home for those who need it. Being excluded from the services increases the risk of social exclusion for **older people with disabilities** and increases the premature decrease in their functional capacity.

Structural discrimination affects adults and older people belonging to these minority groups in many ways. It reduces their inclusion and opportunities to live as they would like.

- *For example, it can lead a person to change their behaviour to avoid various situations.*
- *It also prevents the realisation of their rights and their access to information, which should be available to everyone, which in turn may reduce their trust in the authorities and society.*
- *Structural discrimination increases polarisation in society and segregation between different population groups, which may lead to exclusion of members of minority groups.*
- *All these issues have a negative impact on mental health and thus increase the feeling of being unwell, which can be manifested for instance in substance abuse problems.*



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