**SCRIPT TGV 4**

TITLE: THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO ACCESSIBILITY

**Franck Sioen**: "*The biggest obstacles I face when getting into buildings are the absence of ramps and steps and heavy doors that I need to open that don't open. Accessible toilets are also a problem. And going up and downstairs, of course, I need elevators, which can be sometimes annoying in the event of a fire, that you can't use elevators, so you just have to wait and hope that the building Is not burning down when you are still in it*"."

**Narrator:** Franck Sioen is a 29-year-old Belgian citizen. He has spent his life in a wheelchair and is one of almost hundred million people with disabilities in the EU who suffer from many kinds of discrimination, whether in the form of physical barriers or in the form of stereotypes, stigma and prejudice on the part of society, which almost inevitably fails to see the person other than through their disability.

One such prejudice is that people with disabilities are, medically speaking, unable to work or are too expensive to accommodate in the workplace, which prevents many from taking up a job and realising their full potential at work and living their lives to the full.

The European Economic and Social Committee, the EESC, has long studied the employment situation of people with disabilities in the EU and regularly organises hearings, conferences and country visits to raise awareness of the issues involved. A recent EESC hearing on the employment of people with disabilities revealed their unemployment rate to be twice as high as that of the average population. About 25% of young people with disabilities were said to be without jobs. According to ANED (the Academic Network of Disability Experts), only 50% of Europeans with disabilities work, compared to 75% of those who do not have a disability.

Frank Sioen is one of the more fortunate ones. With hard work, support from his relatives and a little bit of luck, he managed to find a job in the field of European affairs. This has always been his ambition. Today, he works as an advocacy and communication officer for the European Network for Independent Life. “Accessibility” is one of the main challenges he has to face every day, even in the workplace, which has been adapted to his needs. Yet to find a job, he had to overcome other kinds of obstacles.

**Franck**: "*I wanted to find a job. I called to register as an employment seeker. And they told me: Are you sure? Yes, yes, I am sure. Are you sure, because if you are employed, you will lose your disability benefit? Yes, I am aware that I will lose it. Yes, but you will lose it forever. You will never be able to get it back because you have proved that you can work. I said yes. I can take the risk. I want to work, I don't care. Okay, but then again you needed to convince the agency that work was the thing you wanted to do. And for me it was fine. Because I had the chance to get higher education. Many of my friends with a disability, they didn't have this opportunity. So their wage will be lower, which will make the risk for them to not have the disability benefit much bigger. So, therefore there is also a obstacle in the system again tow finding employment. Because you are financially punished in a way.*"

**Narrator:** As a man, Frank Sioen is better off than if he were a woman, who face additional discrimination linked to gender. According to ANED, only 48% of European women with disabilities have a job, compared to 53% of men with disabilities.

Alba Gonzalez is 30 years old and is originally from Madrid. She uses an electric wheelchair. and needs personal assistance to do certain tasks.

**Alba**: "*As a woman, we always have to demonstrate our value. I think much more than men. We need to prove it, yes. And this is also part of the disability. As a person with disability, you have to prove that you can work as a non-disabled person that you can have the same results, that you don't need so much effort, that you are not going to bother so much… I have to prove it as a woman, and I have to prove it as a person with a disability*."

**Narrator:** Seven years ago, Alba Gonzalez moved from Spain to Brussels to find a job and there she was faced with new hurdles.

**Alba**: *"The* *social support is not transferable from country to country, even if you are in an EU country. So, in this sense, I found that freedom of movement is more an illusion for people with disabilities than a reality. Because yes, you have the right to work in another country, but how can you work if you are not able to get out of your bed every morning because you don't have the money, or you don't have the support?*"

**Narrator:** The question of employment has always been at the centre of the public debate concerning people with disabilities. But how has the way the issue of disability is framed changed over time in Europe? Have we come a long way compared to several decades ago with regard to how we perceive disability, to what extent do we enable people with disabilities to contribute to the economy and society?

**Mark Priestley**: «*In countries all across Europe, the primary definition of disability in policy, in status was very much related to employment. So, you see a lot of legislation around disability is about trying to identify and manage a group of people who the state finds difficult to deal with in a capitalist economy.*.

**Narrator:** Mark Priestley is Professor of Disability Policy at the University of Leeds, UK.

**Mark Priestley**: "*It is much later that we started having this idea about the disabled people having right to employment. So, for example, in the 1950s the ILO Convention on Disability and Unemployment sort of really set out the idea that the disabled people have the right to work. So often til that point I think we were dealing with disabled people more as a welfare issue in public policy.* *And really from the 1950s, we start to see disability policies which are more directed toward getting people with disabilities into employment. So we see a lot of emphasis on rehabilitation and the emergence of new employment policies. So, for example, states using quotas systems. We see states in Europe starting to use a wage subsidy. And then really in the 1990s, and after that, we start to see this move toward non-discrimination legislation*."

**Narrator:** It is in the ‘90s that the European Union obtained some powers that allowed it to take action.

**Mark Priestley: “***Previous to the Treaty of Amsterdam, the EU had very little power to act on non-discrimination on grounds of disability. So, the incorporation of disability along with other grounds of difference has enabled the EU to be more active. And the real step forward after that, after the 1997 Treaty, was with the directive in the year 2000. So the Directive on Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation and Training had a direct effect on employment. Because really for the first time, that required the Member States to put in place some kind of legislation which would outlaw discrimination on the ground of disability in employment. Now, some Member States already had national norms, which fulfilled that but it really was a step forward towards making that more comprehensive.”*

**Narrator:** Althoughthe directive established European standards, the key reference is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006. The Convention was the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century. Its purpose is to make sure that people with disabilities enjoy the same rights as everyone else and live their lives with dignity. Article 27 of the Convention recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others. **Yannis Vardakastanis**, Vice-president of the European Economic and Social Committee's Diversity Europe Group and President of the European Disability Forum, explains why the Convention is so important.

**Vardakastani**s: "*It is a change maker of the disability rights policies where it is appropriately applied*. *And for the European Union, it represents a complete turn to use the human right approach towards the rights of people with disabilities*."

**Narrator:** But although the convention was ratified by the EU in 2010, Member States have so far failed to implement it properly.

As the EU's ten-year disability strategy is coming to an end, the EU's disability agenda for the next decade, which is in the making, should be fully harmonised with the CRPD. This was one of the top recommendations made by the EESC in its recent opinion, in which it gave its contribution to shaping the new EU agenda for disability rights.

The opinion, drafted by Mr Vardakastanis, also called for disability to be part of all EU policies. This means pushing for acceptance of people with disabilities as part of human diversity and fighting any form of stigma or discrimination.

**Vardakastanis**: « *Now, what we need is this. We need changes in the structures. The inter-institutional coordination that needs to happen among the EU institutions. Also, we need changes in policy and law making. We need legislation, as I said, policies programmes, standards. All public funding should be utilised to produce and accessible environment: accessible environment in schools, the workplace, and places of recreation. In whatever citizens without disabilities do."*

Policymakers should also push for more funds to be made available under the new multiannual budget currently being negotiated

The EESC says that Member States should be encouraged to create their own national strategies on the rights of people with disabilities, but also advocates stronger EU monitoring of the new agenda’s implementation, with "disability focal points" within all Commission directorates-general, agencies and EU institutions and close cooperation between institutions on disability.

**Narrator:**  Beyond that, concrete measures are needed to increase the levels of employment of people with disabilities:

**Vardakastanis**: "*When we speak about employment, we would like to see complete measures. On the one hand, we need reasonable accommodation. Employment without reasonable accommodation cannot really happen. Secondly, we need to put in place incentives like quotas systems. First and foremost, we need equal treatment legislation: full application of the Equal Treatment Directive, with full respect for reasonable accommodation*."

**Narrator**: It is not clear if legislative changes and the removal of physical barriers will be enough. Probably not, unless we get rid of mental barriers as well.

**Franck Sioen:** *"I think if you really want to give more disabled people the opportunity to be in employment*, *we need tokind of think differently. We need to say: ok, how can we make employment more accessible, more inclusive, not only physically but also in terms of mindset? We need a shift: we need to stop using fossil fuel, we need to stop putting people with disabilities into segregated boxes, this kind of way*".

**Narrator:** To learn more about the EESC's proposals, you can find its opinion on our website [www.eesc.europa.eu](http://www.eesc.europa.eu).