Part I

From Social Policy to the Human Rights Law of the 21st Century
Disability Studies, the Social Model and Legal Developments

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1 Introduction

Disabled people and their allies worldwide have organized over the past few decades to challenge the discrimination and exclusion of disabled people from mainstream society. In particular, they have challenged the over-medicalized, pathological and individualist accounts of disability and the disabled people’s movement has focused attention on social oppression and environmental barriers.1 The politics of the disability rights movement has its roots in a family of social explanations of disability which have been developed by disability studies scholars and activists. This new social-contextual understanding of disability, most commonly referred to as “the social model,” has created a new vision of disability and has influenced policy making at local and international levels. This re-conceptualization of disability shifts the focus from the individual to the environment and draws attention to the social barriers disabled people face in their everyday lives. Disability studies scholars have been instrumental in developing this new understanding of disability which has provided a foundation for legal development worldwide, including the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).2

This chapter examines the roots of the personal experience, political activism and academic thought that has influenced the creation of “the social model.” Although the social-contextual understanding of disability has many common characteristics worldwide, this new approach to disability has been expressed

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