

Plain Text: BBC Panorama- Paralympics: The Unfair Games?

Image Description: Each slide has a pale green background with different coloured text boxes.

Slide 1

A LUNA Project resource reflecting on... BBC Panorama Paralympics: The Unfair Games?

Exploring how both the BBC and IPC are contributing to and enabling the discrimination of disabled athletes - breaking down what is happening and hear from affected athletes about the impact this has had.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is at the top in the centre. On top of the background on the left hand side is a pale green splotch and on the right is a pale blue splotch. All of the text is centered and in a black font.

Slide 2

The Programme...

On the 9th of June 2021, BBC 1 aired a Panorama episode entitled "Paralympics: The Unfair Games?". It was described on IPlayer as the following: "With the Tokyo Paralympic Games approaching, Panorama investigates the sport's classification system. Designed to make competition between athletes with different disabilities fair, it is accused of being flawed, easily manipulated and lacking credibility." The episode begins looking at the history of the Paralympic games, the evolution of the classification system and later the errors associated with it- something that we unpack later in this resource.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. In the bottom right hand corner is a pale blue splotch. In the bottom left hand corner is a screenshot from BBC iPlayer, it shows a close up of Para athlete Richie Powell. The text is all centered and in a black font.

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What is the IPC?

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is an international non profit organisation, founded in 1989. The IPC is an athlete-centred organisation composed of an elected Governing Board, a management team and various Standing Committees and Councils.

According to the IPC website their vision is to "make for an inclusive world through Para sport." and they strive to achieve this vision through their mission: "to lead the Paralympic Movement, oversee the delivery of the Paralympic Games and support members to enable Para athletes to achieve sporting excellence."

Whilst in theory this sounds incredibly positive, in practice it is not so idealistic. The IPC has been under fire for their classification system, which previously had allowed for corrupt classifications in the highest levels of Para sport, but now has changed to exclude thousands of disabled athletes.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. In the bottom left hand corner is a pale blue splotch. In the bottom right hand corner is the International Paralympic Committee logo set on a white background. All the text on the slide is aligned to the left and is in black font.

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Classification Changes

The IPC classification system is something that has changed over time. We are specifically interested in the intense crackdown on the classification code that occurred in 2015 and later came into effect in 2017.

According to the IPC Athlete Classification Code (2015), the unique systems of Classification used in Para sports perform 2 critical functions (1) defines who is eligible to compete in Para-sport and (2) groups Athletes into Sport Classes which aim to ensure that the impact of Impairment is minimised and sporting excellence determines which Athlete or team is ultimately victorious. However, these recent changes have narrowed the conditions deemed eligible for participation significantly. Leaving thousands of disabled athletes unable to compete as their condition doesn't fit into 1 of the 10 eligible categories.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. In the top left hand corner is a pale green splotch. The three paragraphs of text on the slide alternate being aligned to the left, right, left. All the text is in black font.

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"Non-Eligible" Conditions

To appreciate the vast number of conditions excluded by the new classification system we looked to the International Standard for Eligible Impairments (2016).

This included:

- Conditions characterised by pain eg. CRPS
- Hearing impairment
- Conditions that cause low muscle tone eg. some forms of cerebral palsy
- Conditions including Hypermobility and Joint instability eg. EDS
- Those with Tics and seizures
- Conditions that primarily cause fatigue
- Conditions that are primarily psychological or psychosomatic in nature

This list is not exhaustive.

You can see just from the list above that by "cracking down" on eligibility thousands of athletes are left unable to participate in sport. They are deemed "not disabled enough" for Para sports yet "too disabled" for the "mainstream" equivalent.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. There is a pale blue textbox containing the list of ineligible conditions. All of the text is aligned to the centre and in a black font.

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Why the BBC programme has received backlash from the Para sport community ...

Many disabled athletes were elated when they saw that the BBC were providing a platform to talk about the IPC classification issues. So when faced with a programme that was a) very one sided in nature, b) contained inherently ableist comments and c) perpetuated inequality among disabilities- the community were both outraged and disappointed in equal measure.

In particular, former elite Para athlete Liz McTernan, caused upset when she referred to those with debilitating conditions such as CRPS as being "barely disabled." McTernan highlighted that "people are appearing almost able bodied, you'd barely be able to tell what their disability is."

These exclusionary and ableist comments completely undermine the struggle those with conditions like CRPS and other less obvious disabilities face.

Athletes past and present put across how they feel the classification system is unfair , highlighting that "there are some who seek to be classified in a condition that they will win rather than will compete." That the IPC's inclusion of those with a range of disabilities is an attempt to "cleanse the sport of those it was originally meant for" and make it more marketable. Without consideration for those adversely impacted and excluded.

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the bottom right hand corner. There are 3 paragraphs of text, all aligned to the left. The first paragraph is half in black font and half in purple font. The second paragraph is placed upon a pale green text box and is in black font, much like the third paragraph.

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Community Response

Understandably, and quite rightly so, both the IPC classification changes and the Panorama episode have evoked a big reaction from the Para sport community and beyond! We asked some of the LUNA community their thoughts and this is what they said:

Ella (she/her) eloquently shares her reaction to the BBC documentary

"The Paralympics is not a sport for people with cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries and spina bifida. It is for people with disabilities, and whether you like it or not, CRPS, EDS, FND and others are all disabilities. Your feelings on someone else's disabilities, or on how visible a disability is, is completely irrelevant. The Paralympics may not have originally been designed for someone with my disabilities, but that is in no way an excuse to exclude me from sports. I don't have a place in Paralympic sport and that isn't my fault."

"Whilst I am not a para sport participant, it's hard to see my friends work so hard at their craft but not be able to progress."

"The BBC had an opportunity to explore just how detrimental the IPC classification system has been to disabled athletes, but instead took this opportunity to further perpetuate and to some extent normalise the discrimination enabled by the IPC."

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. There are 4 sections of text on the slide. The first is aligned centrally at the top in black font. Underneath this on the left is a black and white image of Ella (she/her) sitting in her sports wheelchair outside, with her back to the camera. Edited onto the sky is the text "I don't have a place in Paralympic sport but... that isn't my fault." To the right of this image is a block of black text in a pale blue textbox. Underneath the image of Ella is a pale blue text box with black font, to the right of this is a pale green text box also with black font.

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Alice (she/her) plays wheelchair basketball, in response to the programme she took to Twitter to say: "The Paralympic classification system shouldn't exclude disabled people. I've had my Paralympic dream taken away from me as I am diagnosed with EDS, CRPS and PoTS. Even though people who have the same actual impairment, and some less impaired can compete, just because they have a different disability. People with CRPS aren't 'barely disabled'. CRPS impacts every area of my life"

Alice (she/her) a Para athlete: "In my opinion, the International Paralympic Committee's classification system is beyond corrupt and needs to be reviewed in a myriad of ways."

"Para sports is an incredible way to combat these stereotypes & it is now being ripped away from people who need it the most. "

"A committee that claims to unite now divides, that claims to include now excludes and that claims to break down stereotypes now upholds them."

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the bottom left hand corner. There are 4 sections of text on the slide all in black font. The first is in the top right and is in a pale blue text box. To the left of this is a photograph of Alice (she/her) sitting in her sports wheelchair with her back to the camera, her arms reaching up to shoot at a basketball net. Underneath this on the left are 3 small, pale

green text boxes. In the bottom right is a photo of Alice (she/her) sitting in her sports wheelchair. She is holding a tennis racket across her body.

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Hannah (they/them), a para climber shares their thoughts:

"People are excluded based on an excluded condition (FND, CRPS, EDS, ME etc) even though some of these have very similar presentations to other conditions that are eligible yet they are excluded." "It puts barriers up to people participating at all in disability sports, not just at Olympic level."

Amelie (she/her) shares her reflections "Wheelchair tennis changed my life and made me so much happier than before I discovered disabled/wheelchair sports, but it breaks my heart knowing how unfair the system is against people with disabilities similar to mine."

"The Paralympics should be an opportunity to unite as a group with shared experiences of oppression in society, not an opportunity to pit disabilities against one another."

"At what point do we stop calling Para sport inclusive when at the most elite level, the IPC classification system is anything but inclusive."

Not Disabled Enough, a group of young disabled activists and athletes who are excluded from Para Sports due to the new IPC classification system demanding change. Took to Instagram to share their thoughts surrounding "The IPC: Discrimination, Disgust and Despair". The group utilizes direct quotes from the Paralympics website to show how they are "preaching inclusion but practicing exclusion".

Image Description

The LUNA Project logo is in the top right hand corner. There are 5 sections of text on the slide all in black font. The first is in the top left and is in a pale green text box. To the right of this is a photograph of Hannah (they/them) climbing up an indoor climbing wall with their back to the camera.. Underneath this there are 3 small, pale blue text boxes. In the bottom left is a photo of the Not Disabled Enough Logo- a white background with a black sports wheelchair in the centre. The left hand wheel is made to encompass both the olympic torch and the IPC logo colours (blue, red and green). In the bottom right hand corner is a pale green text box.

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Find Out More and Help Make Change...

Not Disabled Enough, a group of young disabled activists and athletes who are excluded from Para Sports due to the new IPC classification system who are sharing their stories and lobbying for systemic change.

Sign this Change.org petition started by George Bates demanding the IPC review the classification system.

Have a look at the media coverage of wheelchair basketball player Oscar Knight, who initially brought this issue to the attention of mainstream media- gaining lots of support and visibility.

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The LUNA Project logo is in the bottom left hand corner. There are 3 sections of text on the slide all in black font. The first is in the top right and is in a pale blue text box. To the right of this is a photograph of the Not Disabled Enough logo. Underneath this a small, pale blue text box. On the left is a screenshot of a Change.Org petition. In the bottom left is a photo of Oscar Knight, sitting in his sports wheelchair, facing the camera holding a basketball on his lap. Across from this, on the right hand side is a pale blue text box.