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Summary of the e-Discussion on
**Political Participation of Women with
Disabilities**

July 2019



Inter-Parliamentary Union
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LAUNCHING MESSAGE

Background

It is estimated that [15% of the world's population live with some form of disability](#) and that prevalence is higher among women, as about [1 in 5 women 18 years and older live with one](#). The 12th session of the Conference of States Parties to the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) took place in the UN Headquarters in New York from 11 to 13 June 2019 and focused on the overarching theme of "Ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in a changing world through the implementation of the CRPD." The CRPD, which includes gender equality as one of its general principles, recognizes "that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."¹²

In 2019, women still represent a small minority of elected representatives and political decision-makers everywhere. Worldwide, only 24.3% of parliamentarians, 6.6% of heads of state, and 5.2% of heads of government are women.³ Data on political participation of women with disabilities is scarce. According to the [UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development](#), the limited available data shows an "extremely low" participation and representation of women with disabilities in political leadership roles. It reports that "[T]he representation of women from organizations of persons with disabilities tends also to be low in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters" and that their representation "in national machinery for gender equality is even lower."⁴

Everyone has the right to take part in government⁵ and public affairs, to vote, and to be elected.⁶ Women with disabilities are a diverse group who experience various degrees of discrimination and face many systemic barriers to the exercise of their political rights and empowerment because of their gender and disability. These barriers can be of legal, physical, and attitudinal nature, and include an inadequate access to education, health care, employment, and justice.

Objective

This e-Discussion aims to promote a dialogue on the political participation of women with disabilities, in all their diversity, and exchange knowledge and good practices on ways to increase and strengthen their representation in political institutions and national and local elected bodies. The e-Discussion was held **from 14 June to 8 July 2019**. Civil society advocates including representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities, women and men in national and local politics, government representatives, experts, practitioners, and academia were invited to contribute with their experiences by answering to one or more of the below questions. The submissions contributed to the elaboration of this Consolidated Reply that aims to augment the knowledge base available on the topic.

¹ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Preamble, para (e). 2006.

² See also Articles 6 and 29 of the CRPD.

³ Map of Women in Politics. UN Women and IPU, 2019: unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/03/women-in-politics-2019-map

⁴ Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Person with Disabilities, UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2018, page 110.

⁵ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 21. 1948: ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Documents/UDHR_Translations/eng.pdf

⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 25. 1966: ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx

Questions

1. What is the level of political participation of women with disabilities in your country/region? Where can this information be found?
2. Amongst women with disabilities in political leadership roles in your country, which groups of women with disabilities (e.g. women with sensory disabilities such as visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities, and intellectual and psycho-social disabilities) are most represented?
3. What are the obstacles limiting women with disabilities' participation and representation in politics in your country?
4. What can be done to increase women with disabilities' access to political leadership roles in your country? How inclusive of women with disabilities are existing programmes focused on women's political participation? Please share concrete examples of programmes, laws, regulations, and practices.

CONTRIBUTORS

The following participants joined the e-Discussion from 14 June to 8 July 2019:

1. [Alfa Nur Aini](#), **Malaysia**
2. [Gulmira Kazakunova](#), Chair of NGO Ravenstvo (Equality) and Chair of the Central Asian Network of Women with Disabilities, **Kyrgyzstan**
3. [Hannah Loryman](#), Policy Advisor on Social Inclusion and Education, Sightsavers, **United Kingdom**
4. [Lasanthi Daskon Attanayake](#), Program and Inclusion Manager at International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), **Sri Lanka**
5. [Maribel Derjani Bayeh](#), Policy Specialist, UN Women, **United States**
6. [Naomi Navoce](#), Uniting World Pacific Programs Officer, **Fiji**
7. [Nsono Josephine Nwiemalu](#), Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), **Cameroon**
8. [Simone Ellis Oluoch-Olunya](#), Policy Advisor at UN Women's Arab States Regional Office, **Egypt**
9. [Tiina Kukkamaa](#), Chief of Democratic Governance and Gender Unit of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), **Poland**
10. [Virginia Atkinson](#), Inclusion Advisor at IFES, **United States**

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to participate in this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices and recommendations. The contributions are summarized below.

1. **What is the level of political participation of women with disabilities in your country/region? Where can this information be found?**

Although there are no official global statistics on the political representation of women with disabilities, participants agree that women with disabilities are severely underrepresented in politics everywhere. [Maribel Derjani Bayeh](#) shares that findings from 19 countries in 2017 show that only 2.3% of women with disabilities were a legislator, senior official, or manager. According to the same data, in 14 out of 18

countries in **Asia and the Pacific** region, there was no female parliamentarian with disabilities in the national legislative body.⁷

In **Kyrgyzstan**, women with disabilities are absent from all levels of politics, shares [Gulmira Kazakunova](#). In **Sri Lanka** and **Fiji**, participants report “extremely low” participation and representation of women with disabilities. [Lasanthi Daskon Attanayake](#) says that despite the 25% gender quota in the local elections in Sri Lanka, which might encourage more women to contest, only one woman with a disability ran but did not win.

In **Malaysia**, there is only one female Senator and one female representative in the National Education Advisory Council with mobility impairments, according to [Alfa Nur Aini](#).

In **Cameroon**, the representation of women with disabilities in political roles is very low and limited to local government with at least three representatives in local councils, according to estimates from [Nsono Josephine Nwiemalu](#), who deplores the lack of official data on this issue.

Data on the participation of women with disabilities as voters, observers and poll workers is also scarce. Organizations of persons with disabilities and observation missions can collect such data using available tools such as [IFES’ Election Access Observation Toolkit](#). [Virginia Atkinson](#) shares that observation of Election Access has found that there are often fewer women with disabilities serving as candidates or poll workers, compared to men with disabilities, consistent with gender disparities between women and men poll workers without disabilities.

2. Amongst women with disabilities in political leadership roles in your country, which groups of women with disabilities (e.g. women with sensory disabilities such as visual and hearing impairments, physical disabilities, and intellectual and psycho-social disabilities) are most represented?

As seen in the previous section, the voices of women with disabilities are severely missing from political decision-making in most countries. Participants report that when women with disabilities are represented, such as in **Cameroon**, **Kenya** and the **United Kingdom**, it is mostly women with mobility and physical impairments. [Simone Ellis Oluoch-Olunya](#) argues that persons with intellectual or non-visible disabilities are often unrecognized and misunderstood by the general public.

3. What are the obstacles limiting women with disabilities’ participation and representation in politics in your country?

All participants recognize that women with disabilities face many challenges and barriers which limit their visibility, access, participation and representation at all levels of political decision-making, internationally, nationally, regionally and locally.

Many contributors identify **stigma and discrimination** as the biggest obstacles to the political participation and representation of women with disabilities. [Virginia Atkinson](#) shares that according to the policy platform developed by women with disabilities in **Kenya**, discrimination stems from “myriad challenges faced by women with disabilities such as lack of access to education, myths and cultural practices that are discriminatory and harmful,” among other issues. [Hannah Loryman](#) notes that in **Cameroon**, people with

⁷ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2018). “Realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities.” Page 139.

disabilities experience negative attitudes about their participation in political life, and when they are included, it is perceived as “tokenistic”. Women with disabilities in **Malaysia, Fiji** and **Sri Lanka** often face **intimidation** in addition to stigma and discrimination, which hinders their social inclusion and limits their opportunities in politics, says [Naomi Navoce](#).

Stereotypes about women with disabilities’ capacity also limits engagement. In **Senegal**, perceptions that people with disabilities are “incapable” often lead to exclusion, says [Hannah Loryman](#). Stereotypes based on **cultural beliefs and attitudes** are sometimes exaggerated for women with disabilities, who carry the double burden of gender and disability discrimination. [Virginia Atkinson](#) reports that according to a woman with a disability in **Nepal**, earning a college degree had a significant impact on how her community viewed her: “Things have changed a lot now; community perception has changed. They view my activism and involvement in the disability community positively and now I am an example to my community.”

Family can be a powerful obstacle as well, argues [Virginia Atkinson](#). For example, a woman with a hearing impairment who participated in an IFES Focus Group in **Tunisia** reported that her father prohibits her from participating in public life, which deprives her from opportunities for engaging in political events and processes.

Voting can be a particularly challenging endeavor for many women with disabilities. Participants identify **violence** and **inaccessible infrastructure** as major deterrents for participation. For women with disabilities in **Kenya, Malaysia** and **Nepal** for example, the potential for violence, combined with lack of access results in fear and reluctance to head to the polls. An election observer in Kenya admits that most women with disabilities “do not turn up to vote because we fear the hostile environment,” reports [Virginia Atkinson](#). Although most infrastructure and accessibility challenges equally affect both men and women, in some instances, where the only solution for a voter with a disability to access the polls is to be physically carried by another person without a disability (usually a man), women with disabilities are at a disadvantage as it may be culturally inappropriate to do so.

Contributors also point to the lack of access to **information and documentation** as another potential challenge for persons with disabilities, particularly women. According to [Hannah Loryman](#), a study in **Cameroon** found that rates of birth registration and birth certificate ownership were low amongst people with disabilities and that women with disabilities were less likely to own a birth certificate than men – creating significant barriers to political participation.

Similarly, participants stress on the lack of quality **education** available to persons with disabilities, especially women, which contributes to them having lower socio-economic conditions. **Poverty** affects women with disabilities disproportionately, making political participation less of a priority for many of them, or even unattainable where financial contributions are required to join political organizations, as is the case in **Cameroon**. [Nsono Josephine Nwiemalu](#) argues that the “triple jeopardy” of being female, living with disabilities and lacking education and financial means are factors that inhibit women with disabilities from participating in political and community activities.

[Tiina Kukkamaa](#) reports that in April 2018, the OSCE/ODIHR organized a conference on "Promoting the political participation of women with disabilities" that highlighted challenges in relation to political participation of women with disabilities. They include: prevailing stereotypes, prejudices and limited expectations from the society; a medical/charity approach to disability (rather than Human Rights based approach); limited access to information, infrastructure and transport; poor-quality and segregated

education; restrictions on legal capacity; gender-based violence ; lack of support for political participation; and unequal resources.

4. What can be done to increase women with disabilities' access to political leadership roles in your country? How inclusive of women with disabilities are existing programmes focused on women's political participation? Please share concrete examples of programmes, laws, regulations, and practices.

Participants share many recommendations and good practices for governments, legislators, political parties, and civil society to facilitate the access of women with disabilities to public affairs and political life. They are summarized below.

- States should collect data disaggregated by sex and disability to enable development of necessary policies and measure the achieved progress.
- Public building should be easily accessible to persons with disabilities, especially those that serve as polling stations during elections.
- Restrictions to legal capacity based on disability should be removed.
- Girls and boys with disabilities should have free access to good quality, inclusive education and should have opportunities to develop their skills and talents to the best of their abilities on an equal basis with others.
- Awareness raising campaigns should be implemented among communities, organizations, and institutions about disability, inclusion and gender in order to overcome stereotypes and misconceptions that exist around women with disabilities.
- Women with disabilities should be provided with encouragement, leadership training, capacity building and financial support to participate in politics.
- Women with disabilities should be supported in obtaining official documentation and registering to vote.
- Political parties should actively seek to include women with disabilities among their members and ensure their voices are heard.
- Women's organizations should recognize the specific issues faced by women with disabilities and include more women with disabilities among their members and leaders.
- The disability movement should ensure that it is gender-sensitive and inclusive of women with disabilities.
- Adopting an intersectional approach and mainstreaming disability in all areas while ensuring the respect for Human Rights of all women is crucial.

International and development organizations also have a role to play in promoting inclusive electoral processes and the political participation of women with disabilities. [Maribel Derjani Bayeh](#) shares that UN Women, in coordination with national and UN partners, has pushed this agenda forward in several countries, including **Moldova, Tanzania** and **Tunisia**, through:

- Technical assistance to electoral stakeholders on promoting inclusive electoral arrangements and facilitating the participation of persons with disabilities (i.e. accessible voting procedures, facilities and materials);
- Capacity-building, targeting electoral officials and aspiring women candidates with disabilities;

- Promoting civic and voter education, and encouraging general awareness on the political rights of persons with disabilities;
- Capacity-building and sensitization of security forces to ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities, especially those of women, are considered when promoting a safe and conducive environment for people to exercise their political rights.

To address political parties as the key gatekeepers to women's political participation, the OSCE/ODIHR provides recommendations on specifically addressing the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. The new [Guidelines on Promoting the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities](#), which includes a disability inclusion checklist for political parties and parliaments, is a useful tool for greater inclusion of women with disabilities in politics.

The IFES program *Power to Persuade* focuses on creating spaces for marginalized groups to collaborate on promoting engagement in politics. [Virginia Atkinson](#) reports that in **Lebanon**, the programme supported the formation of intersectional advocacy coalitions that have empowered women with disabilities to partner with organizations advocating for gender equality, disability and LGBTQ rights, refugees, and health among other issues. In **Kenya** and **Nepal**, the programme collaborated with women with disabilities to create policy platforms and outline tangible policy recommendations for government stakeholders. The policy platforms provided a space to discuss issues that impact women with disabilities and produce materials used as advocacy tools across communities.

Participants note that international commitments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which upholds women's right to participate in public life, the Beijing Platform for Action which calls for removing barriers to equal participation, the CRPD which guarantees to persons with disabilities political rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals which measure progress towards gender equality in part by the share of women in national parliaments and local government, have created positive momentum for more policies and programs aiming at promoting the political participation of women with disabilities.

However, many women with disabilities noted they have not yet felt the positive impact of this momentum. [Virginia Atkinson](#) shares that a woman with a disability who participated in an IFES focus group discussion said: "Gender equality has become one of the priorities in **Indonesia** now, so this is helpful for women with disabilities. However, we still live in a patriarchal society and women with disabilities are considered inferior. The large movement of women's equality can benefit women with disabilities, but we are not yet included."