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**NGO Report on the State of Palestine for the 33rd Session of the Committee
on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities / Rapport des ONG sur l'État de
Palestine pour la 33^{ème} session du Comité des droits des personnes
handicapées**

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Introduction

1. The Centre for Voters Initiative & Action presents this report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ahead of the 33rd session for the review of Palestine. The Centre is a non-governmental organisation based in the Americas with an international focus. The Centre acknowledges there can be no secure tomorrow without ensuring civil societies have knowledge to vote, participate, and engage with the democratic processes.
2. The Centre works with multiple international mechanisms to convey dialogue, conduct research, and bring awareness to the thematic issues of electoral engagement around the world. We closely follow and participate in the United Nations human rights mechanisms in Geneva and abroad, including the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to promote civil society participation in the public affairs process for persons with disabilities.
3. Recognising the complex nature of the recent challenges Palestine faces, the Centre hopes to provide valuable information to the Committee regarding the State's compliance with issues exacerbating in compliance under Article 29. Indeed, this report is focused on the scope of Article 29, and we encourage Committee members to understand the nature of civic education as a tool to combat this contemporary turmoil; hopefully, the Committee will find this report valuable.
4. This report focuses on three specific violations that hinder the rights of persons with disabilities on their participation in political life in Palestine: (1) a diminished nature of self-determination creating cyclical civic exclusion; (2) continuous barriers to inclusive civic education and participation; and (3) a neglect of political participation and legal representation.

Barriers to Inclusive Education and Participation

Limited Civic Education for Children with Disabilities

5. Some of those born in Gaza often are often "imbued with a feeling of closeness, of being hemmed in".¹ For them and many others, education is the only path to a better life. It is important to note that literacy rates in Gaza exceed 97.8%, even with 21% of households in Gaza reporting a disability before 7 October 2023.²
6. With the recent conflict, those numbers have skyrocketed, with over 441,000 persons now living with a disability.³ In addition, approximately 87.7% of all school

¹ The Guardian, *There are more child amputees in Gaza than anywhere else in the world. What can the future hold for them?*, (27 March 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/mar/27/gaza-palestine-children-injuries>.

² Ibid.

³ UNICEF, *Facing life in the Gaza Strip with a new disability*, (21 December 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/sop/stories/facing-life-gaza-strip-new-disability>.

buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, according to the non-governmental organisation, Save the Children.⁴ Gaza's education is in ruins as a result of the conflict, thus resulting in an inability for persons with disabilities in particular, to pursue change.

7. The Centre has always emphasised in its reports of the importance in civic education as a tool for catapulting a civil society to increased representation and participation in the public and political life. In Palestine, the situation is more important than ever: with the Palestinian people facing a heavy crackdown, having knowledge is power.
8. With ever-increasing threats from occupation, legal fragmentation, exclusion from education, and more, persons with disabilities without accessible civic instruction will result in them being continuously unaware of their ability to pursue change. It is vital that the State party advances its civic education efforts to ensure those in Palestine can express their Article 29 rights continuously.

The State party should enquire, during the interactive dialogue, what measures are being taken to preserve civic education for persons with disabilities amidst a time of intense turmoil where many education centres have been forced closed.

In particular, the Committee should urge the need for continuous civic education outreach programmes in accessible formats in partnerships with local civil society groups to provide political resources to those stuck in certain areas.

9. A study in Washington State University on analysing the status of civic education in Palestine revealed numerous internal concerns, too. Amongst three Palestinian textbook curricula, the "teaching of citizenship and government lacked visual and linguistic representations of women".⁵ Whatsoever, when the status of women was referenced, it was largely in tandem with stereotypical gender-norms (e.g. rearing children, taking care of the household, etc.).
10. The study ultimately concluded the textbooks used to educate children in Palestine often emphasise gender bias and male supremacy. Persons with disabilities who are already receiving limited education may also be receiving information that caters in favour of delegating the roles of certain sexes in public life. Indeed, gender is by no means a limitation, nor is disability; the State party should ensure its national curricula are portraying men and women in equal roles with equal possibilities.

The Committee should urge the State party to strengthen its efforts to increase the representation of women in all spheres of society, including in decision-making positions, through increased civic education measures that equally recognise women.

⁴ Save the Children, *Education Under Attack in Gaza, With Nearly 90% of School Buildings Damaged or Destroyed*, (16 April 2024), <https://www.savethechildren.net/blog/education-under-attack-gaza-nearly-90-school-buildings-damaged-or-destroyed>.

⁵ Abdelhadi Basheer at Washington State University, *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Civic Education in Palestine, Jordan, and the United States*, (May 2022), <https://tinyurl.com/5n7zt2vc>.

Neglect of Political Participation and Legal Representation

Exclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Political Dialogues

11. Although international standards considering the liberties of persons with disabilities, such as the Convention itself, often mandate civics participation and the co-creation of policy alongside marginalised persons as a standard of governance, these frameworks often go unpractised in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.
12. Comprehensive analyses by the International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law indicate that there exist legal insufficiencies in requiring the consultation of persons with disabilities as well as disabled persons' organisations during legislation drafting and general decision-making processes among state institutions.⁶ As a result, Palestinian policy concerning disabled persons, most namely, the 1999 Palestine Law No. 4, stand to be outdated, nonenforced, and ultimately, detached from the lived truths of persons with disabilities.⁷
13. Furthermore, a 2024 study conducted by Dr. Nazmi Al Masri reviews outlines which enshrine accessibility and inclusivity within systems of education.⁸ To quote directly, Al Masri details a "vast disability data hole" within the construction of educational infrastructure, reflecting a gap within representation which morphs political: without firsthand knowledge of the vast network of inequities which face disabled Palestinians, legislation becomes uninformed. Placing yet another barrier for disabled persons' perspectives to enter legislative spaces, policies alter to be less responsive and less effective in addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities, contributing to political erasure and broader cycles of exclusion within governance.
14. Continuing on, higher education fails to accommodate educational quality for Palestinian students with disabilities, in reference to physical building access, learning resources, as well as academic culture.⁹ In an era where tertiary education not only serves as a pathway to civic leadership but also depicts microcosm of the patterns present in political life, Dr. Abu Habib's research emphasises that a persistence in the lack of adaptivity for students will limit opportunities for leadership development and growth, therefore stifling capabilities to be active in the political sphere and further reinforcing civic disenfranchisement.

⁶ International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law, *Palestine - Civic Freedom Monitor*, (24 June 2024), <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/palestine>.

⁷ قانون حقوق المعوقين - Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities No. (4) of 1999. Issued on 9 August 1999, and published in the Palestinian Official Gazette on 10 October 1999. Accessed at: https://e-inclusion.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/resources/handicap_law_0.pdf

⁸ Islamic University of Gaza & Project Disability Under Siege, *Inclusive Education in Occupied Palestinian Territories*, (March 2021), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377978573_Inclusive_Education_in_Occupied_Palestinian_Territories_Literature_and_Practice_Review.

⁹ Journal of Culture and Values in Education, *Disability and Higher Education in Palestine*, (December 2019), <http://dx.doi.org/10.46303/jcve.03.02.4>.

15. Concerning deinstitutionalisation in Gaza, within the Occupied Palestinian Territories, institutional settings are shaped by colonialist legacies and priorities as opposed to the humanitarian needs of disabled communities. In political dialogue, competing priorities of the Palestinian people are driven away by the desires of external donors and Israeli settler agendas, diminishing the capacity for persons with disabilities to influence policy in participatory manners.
16. Without this focus on community-based care, which proliferates civic engagement, but also inclusion and autonomy as a whole, disabled Palestinians remain to be segregated from political environments, further obstructing any form of political participation citizens may employ to reduce civic invisibility.

The Centre politely urges the Committee to turn its attention to the lack of free-flowing dialogue between the State party and its local civil society organisations. Indeed, it is necessary to facilitate regular policy discussions to achieve tangible change.

Inaccessible Electoral Systems

17. The consistent disenfranchisement of Palestinians with disabilities is driven by structural and administrative barriers which further electoral inaccessibility. During the 2005 presidential election, the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights monitored 107 polling stations across Gaza.¹⁰ Among the observed stations, a significant portion lacked ramps, signage, or proper ballot formats to accommodate disabled persons with mobility and visual impairments. The Centre notes, “not a single polling station visited in Gaza had been adapted to the needs of disabled persons”, evident of a significant lack of regard to follow infrastructure ensuring electoral equity.
18. Moreover, these matters of electoral inaccessibility are often perpetuated by ambiguities in legal systems. Disabled Palestinian Arab individuals with Israeli citizenship face oppressive structures from multiple lenses, shut out from both Arab municipal civic pathways as well as institutions comprised of a Jewish majority.

With bureaucratic strains crossing from healthcare access into the ability of Palestinian Arabs with disabilities to obtain legal identification – a key component to be able to access the ballot box – it is evident that this dual exclusion will place a cap upon political participation for persons with disabilities, furthering the silence of marginalised voices in direct civic engagement.¹¹

19. The Israeli occupation has also contributed to a structural deprivation of political representation within key government institutions. Violence and apartheid has, and continues to, draw Palestinian Arabs away from their communities into rural or

¹⁰ Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, *PCHR Publishes Evaluation Report on the Palestinian Presidential Election*, (7 February 2005), <https://pchrgaza.org/pchr-publishes-evaluation-report-on-the-palestinian-presidential-election>.

¹¹ Equality Diversity and Inclusion An International Journal 43(2), *The experiences of Palestinian Arabs with disabilities in Israel*, (June 2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EDI-01-2023-0032>.

refugee camp areas, which according to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, are physically less accessible and less likely to have the resources to accommodate disabled voters.¹² As a result, among already-marginalised peoples, voter turnout is deterred, creating further grounds for homogenisation of perspective within the civic space of Palestine.

20. The political exclusion of disabled Palestinians is continually motivated by disconnected systems of governance which cultivate uncertainty in the enforcement of electoral rights protections. As detailed within a report issued by B'Tselem, legal regimes operate differently across varying regions, resulting in a diverse application of Israeli law within the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and other territories.¹³ When governance is layered in such a manner, authority is inconsistent, thus, so must be the implementation of disability rights legislation.
21. With such standards, there will exist no universal standard for accommodation, and no mechanism to remedy such inequities, thus leading to the absence of accessible resources for polling, voter registration, and civic spaces as a whole, preventing the unified mobilisation of Palestinians with disabilities towards definite social change - furthering political exclusion as a whole.

The Centre urges the Committee to press the delegation on efforts being taken to increase accessible infrastructure at voting centres. In particular, the Committee should also ask the State party to provide information on its current programmes relating to promoting the civic turnout of persons with disabilities and should emphasise the need to build infrastructure to promote the political participation of disabled persons.

Legal / Physical Inadequacies for Access to Judicial Relief

22. Legal processes often impose significant financial hardships upon Palestinians with disabilities, particularly those residing within Gaza. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights finds that within Israeli civil courts, court guarantees for Palestinians who file cases can approach a minimum 10,000 NIS.¹⁴
23. Additionally, the sixty-day filing period in regard to compensation complaints and the associated two-year statute of limitations often expire before disabled persons are able to secure the proper funding and documentation needed to file formal complaints. Coupled with court fees and costs of legal representation, these burdens present Palestinians with disabilities with major hurdles in the pursuit of legal recourse, thus, creating a hindrance to access of justice.

¹² Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.

¹³ Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, *Not a "vibrant democracy". This is apartheid*, (October 2022), https://www.btselem.org/publications/202210_not_a_vibrant_democracy_this_is_apartheid.

¹⁴ Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, *2013 Annual Report*, (18 March 2014), https://m.moam.info/annual-report-palestinian-center-for-human-rights_6479c46b097c476c028b9698.html.

24. Significant barriers in legal aid and awareness mechanisms continue to influence judicial assistance for disabled persons in Palestine. Take, for example, the Awn Access to Justice Network in Gaza, supported by the United Nations Development Programme.¹⁵ The network, consisting of a variety of actors from local civil society organisations, provides legal services to vulnerable populations by way of advocacy, workshop sessions, and the allocation of a variety of separate resources.
25. However, among such beneficiaries, persons with disabilities remain insufficiently represented – namely, with unemployment rates for disabled Palestinians exceeding 87% among Palestinians with disabilities.¹⁶ Such inequities, presented within the broader context of civil and social life, hampers autonomy, but also limits the ability for such persons to seek available legal support, navigate convoluted judicial procedures, and access alternate empowerment programs including pamphlets, booklets, and in-person assistance.
26. In addition, Palestinians with disabilities are confronted with physical complications in access to legal aid services, courts, and other in-person resources as a result of deteriorated roads, with several disabled persons living in refugee camps communicating fear of leaving their homes during rainy conditions due to risk of accidents on muddy streets.¹⁷
27. Moreover, municipal officials in Gaza city claim to have no additional plan besides general road maintenance to ensure the mobility of disabled persons, which is evident through the inability of 75% of disabled Palestinians to utilise public transportation.¹⁸ These accessibility challenges, when compounded, severely limit the capability of persons with disabilities to access court appointments, consultations with legal aid, hearings, and more.
28. Further addressing mobility issues as a result of infrastructure, the organisation Human Rights Watch documents the extensive array of concerns resulting from the poor condition of electricity in Gaza, including limited utilisation of assistive devices. According to 2020 findings:

“A 26-year-old woman with a physical disability described having to cancel outings due to her inability to charge her mobility scooter. ‘Electricity outages are my biggest fear,’ she told Human Rights Watch. ‘I need to charge my scooter. Otherwise, I will remain at home...’”¹⁹

¹⁵ Network of Legal Aid Providers, <https://archive.ph/20130615230132/http://www.awnnetwork.ps/en>.

¹⁶ Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation, *Reality of People with Disabilities in Palestine*, <https://cbrpalestine.org/disability-in-palestine>.

¹⁷ Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.

¹⁸ Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Gaza: Israeli Restrictions Harm People with Disabilities*, (3 December 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/03/gaza-israeli-restrictions-harm-people-disabilities>.

29. Such vast restrictions upon movement have a grave toll upon the independence of persons with disabilities, reinforcing isolation from civil life, but also justice systems. Without reliable energy, and thus, functional mobility aids, judicial institutions cannot be properly reached. Altogether, unpaved roads, defective electricity, as well as inaccessible public transportation diminish physical access to legal venues, and thus, restorative justice for marginalised persons.

The Centre urges the Committee to recommend that the State party take measures to address the financial and physical barriers preventing persons with disabilities from accessing justice. This includes, waiving or subsidisation of legal fees; extending procedural deadlines; and ensuring legal aid prioritises persons with disabilities. Without intervention, Palestinians with disabilities will remain systematically excluded from seeking legal redress, thereby reinforcing marginalisation.

Diminished Self-Determination Creating Cyclical Exclusion

Inability to Express Legal Capacities Due to Occupation

30. The nature of the Palestinian state's existence as an occupied territory with limited freedom of will, movement, and decision-making reflects the diminished role of persons with disabilities in the State's public and political life. Since 1967, both the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been heavily occupied; in recent years, presence by external forces has been amplified due to ongoing political tensions.
31. Consequently, even the desire to express a will for self-determination is oppressed. Israel expresses *de facto* control over virtually every aspect of Palestinian existence: where one may receive a building permit, how one may travel within their communities, and how one may receive resources. Thus, it is evident the same standard of supervision applies to legal capacities, including one's right to vote.
32. Palestinians, by vast majority, do not have the right to vote in Israeli elections: those within the Palestinian territories are under occupation, thus excluded from voting.²⁰ Whilst in some areas, like East Jerusalem, some Palestinians may vote in Israeli municipal elections, they have no means to vote in Knesset elections.²¹ Ultimately, these actions gravely undermine the fundamental Article 25 rights under the Covenant for Civil & Political Rights yet also pose unique difficulties for persons with disabilities in Palestine.
33. Without an ability to vote, civil society suffers as a whole by receiving no representation on the policies that most affect them. Yet, persons with disabilities may face unique circumstances as they cannot strive to improve their situation.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, *West Bank and Gaza 2022 Human Rights Report*, (March 2023), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/west-bank-and-gaza/>.

²¹ Texas Law Review, *Voting as a Vehicle for Self-Determination in Palestine and Israel*, <https://texaslawreview.org/voting-as-a-vehicle-for-self-determination-in-palestine-and-israel/>.

From petitioning to remove road blockades to increase accessibility or pushing for the Israeli government to boost accessible digital infrastructure in the occupied territories, a lack of voting rights thereby continues a cycle of turmoil.

34. The impact of occupation has heavy political repercussions, yet it is vital to recognise the individual impacts these issues have on persons with disabilities. In Palestinian municipal or legislative elections, voters in East Jerusalem and the West Bank faced extensive Israeli-imposed movement restrictions, including road closures, checkpoints, and the separation wall.²²
35. Individuals with physical disabilities reported being unable to physically access polling stations due to checkpoints with no ramps or long travel routes with no public accessible transport. According to reports by Al-Haq and Human Rights Watch, elderly and disabled voters in East Jerusalem needed permits to cross into voting areas, and many either never received them or found the process inaccessible.

“My son is blind. We live in the southern West Bank. The elections were held 12 km away, but because of the [Israeli] roadblock and lack of accessible buses, he stayed home. He couldn't vote, even though he was registered.”

The Centre requests that the Committee, in its concluding observations, urge the State of Palestine to take proactive and inclusive measures to protect the voting rights of persons with disabilities, even in areas under Israeli-imposed restrictions.

36. A 2019 study by the National Institute of Health found that disability is more prevalent in the occupied Palestinian territory amongst older persons, women, and illiterate persons.²³ In addition, refugees and unemployed persons were also likely noted to have a higher chance of disability. Whilst increased recognition towards these minorities was validated with a legislative advancement for a disability council, that council has failed to be practically effective.
37. Noting the prevalence of disability amongst lower social and economic groups reveals those more likely to be ignored in the decision-making process; there should be increased efforts from the State party to tailor outreach and situational advancement for elderly persons and women, in particular. Fulfilling proper education and engagement between these demographics and the civic process could set forth a well-needed path for change, allowing them to “live the last part of their life in dignity”.²⁴

²² Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed*, (27 April 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>.

²³ Nouh Harsha et al., *Disability among Palestinian elderly in the occupied Palestinian territory: prevalence and associated factors*, (25 April 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6758-5>.

²⁴ Ibid.

Lack of Enforceable Statehood Processes

38. By consequence of the ongoing occupation, the absence of unified Palestinian sovereignty results in a weak political system. As this system has limited power and influence by consequence of oppression, it is impossible for the State party to realise its abilities to protect the rights of persons with disabilities.
39. For instance, a 2018 B'Tselem report documented the case of a man with paraplegia who had his residency revoked after relocating to Ramallah for rehabilitation, stripping him of access to all public services in his home city.²⁵ Yet, whilst this man suffered, there was no process for him to effectively seek relief from the losses / damages he faced.
40. In Gaza, the ongoing conflict with Hamas has rendered the State of Palestine's authority as moot in improving the situation for persons with disabilities. The exponential increases in war-related disabilities further amplifies the lack of access to critical services, effectively depriving them not only prospects of participating in political life, but enjoying life itself.
41. The Centre notes that the contemporary situation of a lack of relief processes for persons with disabilities is extraordinary, and a strong byproduct of decades of political turmoil and unfair occupation. Whilst this brief does not seek to criticise nor cast blame on the government of Palestine itself, it notes that change *is* needed, especially by the powers which influence these conflicts.
42. Creating a certain authority within the Palestinian government, generated towards persons with disabilities, could remedy this situation. A centre hub for persons with disabilities to lodge accessibility issues; human rights violations; and denials of certain endowed rights under the Convention could pave a future for improvement in the future. Indeed, whilst a centralised complaint system would not entirely solve these situations, it would serve as a foundation for change.

Legal Incoherence Affected by Political Inconsistency

43. An ever-evolving political situation creates massive incoherence for persons with disabilities. In Gaza, those with disabilities face impossible circumstances. As Israeli airstrikes fall, those with visual impairments cannot find way to safety. Crumpled buildings leave those with physical impairments behind. Children who face disabilities see their caretakers and parents killed in conflict, and thousands face cruel circumstances without access to any help or resources amidst a war.

²⁵ The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, *Statistics on Revocation of Residency in East Jerusalem*, (19 April 2023), https://www.btselem.org/jerusalem/revocation_statistics.

44. The situation is beyond comprehension, and the scale of suffering immense. It is impossible for a person with a disability in the state of Palestine to be truly alive, full of hopes and dreams, when they must fight for survival each day. The right of man should not be solely to survive, but live; the Convention undeniably sets forth that notion within its text. Yet, failures of obligation as a result of political tensions only stand to hurt those with disabilities the most.

Persons with disabilities have the fundamental right to live: to pursue their dreams, hopes, and create a life of their own destiny. Yet, as a byproduct of political tensions, they are made only to survive.

The Committee should commend the resilience of the State party in these circumstances, and emphasise the urgency of ending the conflict as soon as possible to provide immediate relief and unconditional aid to persons with disabilities in the Palestine, especially Gaza.

Conclusion

45. In conclusion, the human rights situation in Palestine regarding civic participation for persons with disabilities remains a significant concern. The Centre hopes the Committee has found this information useful and will incorporate these findings into its concluding observations. As outlined in this report, the Centre strongly advocates for comprehensive reforms aimed at ensuring equal access to voting, improving civic education, and fostering inclusive political engagement for persons with disabilities.
46. In particular, the Committee should focus its dialogue with Palestine on the persistent barriers to accessibility at polling stations, the lack of civic education resources in accessible formats, and the economic and policy implementation challenges that continue to stifle the participation of persons with disabilities in the public affairs process.
47. These three key issues undermine the core of Article 29 rights for Palestinian civil society and pose a substantial obstacle to inclusive democracy. Addressing them is crucial to ensuring that persons with disabilities can fully exercise their political rights and contribute to the democratic process. We hope these concerns will be addressed to build a more inclusive and equitable future for all.
48. Indeed, it is imperative to underscore the pivotal role of public awareness and education in facilitating meaningful elections. In the case of Palestine, voting may be a means to preserve the existence of self-determination, offering a glimmering hope for the potential full realisation of human rights to come.
49. This submission may be published on the OHCHR website or any other places necessary. For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact Executive Director Mr. Samad QURAISHI (squraishi@cvia.ch) or the lead author on this report, Ms. Junya LIU (jliu@cvia.ch).