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28 February 2025

**Contribution to the Day of General Discussion Regarding the Rights of  
Disabled Persons to Participate in the Public & Political Life**

To the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

We appreciate this opportunity to submit additional information surrounding thematic concerns regarding the ability for persons with disabilities to contribute to the public and political life. The Centre is an international non-governmental organisation with connections to civil societies worldwide, dedicated to strengthening marginalised voices in political processes and global dialogues.

Our contribution centres on three major concerns that we observe under Article 29, particularly with regard to:

- (1) Lack of focus on the **role of civics education** as a mechanism for future prosperity and representation for disabled persons in the political life;
- (2) Diminished concern regarding measures taken to increase **representation on local governance bodies**, particularly with concern to appropriate resources needed; and
- (3) Discriminatory selection processes of **political parties stifling abilities for disabled women** to fully participate in decision-making processes.

If you have enquiries or further questions regarding this report, do not hesitate to contact primary contributor of this report Mr. Samad QURAISHI at [squraishi@cvia.ch](mailto:squraishi@cvia.ch).

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### **Lack of Focus on Civics Education Preventing Future Political Opportunities**

1. Civic education is the key to political participation. If young people are being taught the fundamental basics of government, including how their government works; how the political system operates; and how one can express their grievances through a democratic system, then they have the ability to realise their rights to participating in the public and political life.
2. Voting is no simple task; each State party has their own nuances as to how one must be able to express their right to vote. In some nations, registration is required ahead of time. In others, one may need certain documents to be granted the right to vote. Worldwide, it is difficult enough for a person without disabilities to determine how they are able to participate in the political life, let alone for a person who has fundamental impairments to their own daily life.
3. It is especially important for persons with disabilities to receive the fundamental knowledge in order to participate in the public and political life; however, the Committee does not regularly focus on civic education as a mechanism for ensuring the future prosperity of disabled persons. In the past decade, the Committee has only enquired about the status of voter education and awareness programmes four times: in Sweden, 2014; Uganda, 2016; Oman, 2018, and Niger, 2019.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup>
4. These enquiries should be more frequent. In these past, aforementioned concluding observations, the Committee has recommended that the State party “ensure that voter education is made more accessible” and that “information about elections is provided in accessible formats”.<sup>5</sup> Undoubtedly, this should continue, but with explicit focus on voter education, especially for youths. Youth are the key to future prosperity: if disabled youth are educated at an early age regarding their ability to participate in elections, then they will see increased chances of civic participation.
5. Too often, the scope of Article 29 is limited to issues which may impair a disabled persons right to vote the day of, such as accessibility issues, requirement of a supervisor to be present in the voting booth, ballots not being able to be processed, or trouble getting to the election centre. However, when considering the ability for disabled persons to participate in elections, one must look into the lead up in the past days, weeks, and months which contribute to the current issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Sweden*, (12 May 2014), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/SWE/CO/1, ¶ 52. <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/SWE/CO/1>.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Uganda*, (12 May 2016), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/UGA/CO/1, ¶ 57(b). <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/UGA/CO/1>.

<sup>3</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Oman*, (17 April 2018), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/OMN/CO/1, ¶ 52(b). <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/OMN/CO/1>.

<sup>4</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Niger*, (1 May 2019), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/NER/CO/1, ¶ 48(d). <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/NER/CO/1>.

<sup>5</sup> See concluding reports on Sweden and Uganda.

6. We urge the Committee to recognise that, when considering issues of a State party under Article 29, they should be more mindful of the status of civic education and voter knowledge programmes in the State party. The presence of these programmes is a fundamental determinant for the future of disabled people's abilities to realise their Article 29 rights; therefore, it is vital that the Committee enquire on the status of civic education during interactive dialogues and emphasise its importance in concluding observations.
7. This can include enquiries to the State party concerning the nature of awareness programmes to ensure there are accessible polling centres; materials for educating disabled persons on their abilities to participate in the civic process; education programmes regarding how a disabled person can receive assistance to vote whilst maintaining independence and privacy; status of disabled youth receiving civic education; and awareness campaigns surrounding the ability of registration to vote, if applicable.

<p><b>The Centre hopes the Committee will begin regularly enquiring to State parties on the status of civics education programmes for disabled persons, given the importance of civic knowledge programmes in fostering disabled persons with the knowledge needed to realise their Article 29 rights and properly engage in electoral processes.</b></p>
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### **Decreased Focus on Disabled Representation in Municipal Governance Bodies**

8. Representation for persons with disabilities must occur on a local, state and national level in order to achieve equitable representation. However, the Centre has observed that even with state- and national-level representation for disabled persons increasing across State parties to the Convention, local/municipal representation has remained poor.
9. Municipal representation on self-governing local entities can cover a variety of issues: local education boards, soil and water conservation positions, local ordinance making, city attorneys, library managers, and so on. The importance of local representation is paramount to the full participation of disabled persons in the public life; however, they are limited due to not having the proper human, financial, and technical resources to (1) seek these positions and (2) execute their duties.
10. Local governance structures are especially difficult to accommodate persons with disabilities due to lacks in infrastructure, accessibility, and other factors. Furthermore, State parties may not have resources allocated on the local level to promote initiatives which foster the inclusion of disabled persons on the local level, even when they may be simultaneously working on the state and federal level, masking the limitations of their implementations of Article 29 with an auspice of success on larger scales of government.

11. To achieve equitable representation for persons with disabilities at municipal levels, the Committee should further centre its attention towards efforts being made by the State party to foster the inclusion of disabled persons on the local level. In particular, it should be mindful of the nature of programmes which exist to support local persons of disabilities seeking to engage in the public or political life. This may include implementation measures such as guidance to municipalities for accommodating disabled persons, apportioned funds to support disabled persons on the local level, and designated staff to support disabled persons on the local level.
12. In the 2023 concluding observations for Georgia, the Committee noted for the first time, that the State party should “[s]trengthen measures to establish representative local councils for issues relating to persons with disabilities in local self-governing units in all municipalities, providing them with the appropriate human, technical and financial resources to perform their duties”.<sup>6</sup>
13. Indeed, the lack of proper resource allocation is a primary barrier to one’s participation in local governance structures. Furthermore, cultural and societal reservations towards disabled persons are more pronounced in local contexts, making it more difficult to achieve representation on a municipal level. These observations are a valuable step towards establishing recognition of local resource allocation situations which may affect disabled person’s seeking to realise their Article 29 rights on a local level, and we hope similar enquiries continue to be asked.

**The Centre further aspires the Committee will continue enquiries on efforts made by the State party to foster disabled persons’ participation in the political life, especially with regards to human, financial and technical resources to support disabled persons’ participation in municipal-level governance.**

**The Centre further recommends that the Committee, in the concluding observations, should promote implementation efforts such as guidance to municipalities for accommodating disabled persons, apportioned funds to support disabled persons on the local level, and designated staff to support disabled persons on the local level.**

### **Local Political Groups Stifling the Role of Disabled Women in Decision-Making**

14. The first step to a woman’s candidacy for office likely starts on the local level. As a result, she will need to rally the support of her local governance societies in order for her to run for office; often times, this includes needing the support of a local political party in order to run for office. A disabled woman’s ability to seek political office is an important tenant of the right for disabled female persons to participate in the political life.

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<sup>6</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Georgia*, (18 April 2023), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/GEO/CO/1, ¶ 58(b). <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/GEO/CO/1>.

15. However, all too often, States see limited female, disabled representation across all branches of government due to local political parties stifling her ability to properly seek office. Local parties are representative of larger national groups, and the key to acquiring a political position depends on the support of one's constituency. Lacks in local political support deprives one's right to participate in governance structures.
16. With regards to female representation in particular, the Centre has observed alarming declarations and actions in its own country of origin which support this argument. In the United States of America, a State which has signed but not ratified the Convention, women face "intersectional disempowerment", due to their dual marginalisation of being both female and disabled.<sup>7</sup>
17. Political parties are the critical gatekeepers to elected office, yet their inadequate engagement with disabled voters and candidates – females in particular due to competency bias and male incumbency advantages – further exacerbates the lack of female disabled representation. Political parties should adopt action items and quotas to begin working in disabled representation in their platforms, thereby achieving more equitable representation.
18. Even in nations where quotas currently exist for female disabled persons to be represented in government, it is difficult to implement these aims due to barriers and resistance from nominating political groups. Once again, these political parties are the gatekeepers to office, and even if a State party takes measures to increase representation, these efforts are moot without support from the nominating parties.
19. Whilst the Committee has expressed concern about "the lack of participation of persons with disabilities, particularly women, in public life and decision-making processes", these statements have often been vague in nature and not explicitly focused on specific issues which lead to the marginalisation of disabled female representation in governments.<sup>8</sup>

**Indeed, a vital paradigm shift regarding the perceptions of disabled women in politics is needed to fully realise our shared humanity, especially amongst nominating parties. The Committee should note how political parties are "gatekeepers" to one's candidacy for office, and recognising that, should enquire how and what measures are being taken to foster inclusion of female disabled candidates.**

**In particular, the Committee should enquire on, and press for, measures of national political parties to increase the representation of disabled women in political processes to achieve this paradigm shift.**

<sup>7</sup> Press Herald, *Commentary: Why Are Disabled Women So Underrepresented in American Politics?*, (14 August 2021, <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/08/14/commentary-why-are-disabled-women-so-underrepresented-in-american-politics/>).

<sup>8</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *Concluding observations on the initial report of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, (2 May 2017), U.N. Doc. CRPD/C/BIH/CO/1, ¶ 52. <https://docs.un.org/en/CRPD/C/BIH/CO/1>.

### **Concluding Notes**

In summary, the Committee has undoubtedly made meaningful strides towards recognising the right of disabled persons to participate in the public and political life. In fact, the Committee has even explicitly referenced certain issues we have raised in some State party dialogues and concluding observations, yet not on a regular basis. In order to achieve increased realisation for disabled persons worldwide under their Article 29 rights, the Committee should:

1. Regularly enquire on, and emphasise the importance of, the **status of improving voter and civic education programmes** for disabled persons to foster genuine knowledge amongst disabled persons, **youth especially**, to increase participation and awareness in elections;
2. Centre its attention on the nature of **allocated resources in representative local councils** on empowering rights of persons with disabilities to participate in decisions in the local level; and
3. Promote a **paradigm shift regarding the ability for disabled women to run for office** by ensuring local political entities and affiliates are actively selecting women for political positions.

I hope these suggestions are of value to the Committee, and that these thematic concerns are brought up in future debates and discussions to ensure all disabled persons living in States party to the Convention can realise their Article 29 rights to the fullest extent.

Kind regards,

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