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From participation to representation: enhancing accessible civic engagement, leadership and advocacy in political and public life

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Background note for round table 3

I. Introduction

1. The term civic space refers to the full range of political participation, from elections to free assembly and association, and it encompasses both State and non-State actors, such as the media and civil society. Civic space should be vibrant, diverse and safe, free from reprisal, harassment, discrimination or violence.¹ However, shrinking civic space, democratic backsliding, the rollback of human rights² and transnational repression³ are a growing and alarming trend in the global context of rising and proliferating conflict; economic instability, shocks and downturns; spiralling wealth and income inequalities; and the accelerating climate crisis. Furthermore, the continuing digitalization of civic space, propelled by the expansion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), has had a profound impact on a variety of rights that are essential to ensure full and effective participation, such as the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to information, and poses risks to democracy, transparency and accountability.⁴

* CRPD/CSP/2026/1.

¹ See A/HRC/57/31.

² See A/HRC/56/50.

³ See www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/transnational-repression-1-en.pdf.

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). 2022. *Elections in Digital Times: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners*.



2. Over the past decades, a persistent downward trend of voter turnout has been observed across the globe.⁵ Encroachment by the State on civil and political liberties, particularly on the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, was especially pronounced during the recent 2023–2025 “super election” cycle.⁶ Widespread misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, mainly disseminated online and amplified through the use of digital technologies, contribute to widening polarization and the rise of extremist political ideologies and agendas. Meanwhile, trust in Governments and State institutions is declining, with over half of the global population having little or no trust in their Government.⁷

3. In this context, and as we mark the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring the political participation of persons with disabilities constitutes an essential and impactful avenue towards bolstering democratic governance and strengthening the civic space, as well as amplifying efforts to realize the rights enshrined in the Convention for, with and by persons with disabilities.

4. To this end, it is fundamental that all barriers are dismantled to ensure accessible and meaningful engagement. In addition, opportunities should be developed to foster and cultivate the advocacy and leadership potential and capacity of persons with disabilities to participate as active, engaged and influential actors in the civic space, ranging from voting in elections, holding public office, and establishing and leading organizations of persons with disabilities.

5. The round table on enhancing accessible civic engagement, leadership and advocacy in political and public life will focus on reviewing progress, identifying gaps and challenges, and sharing experiences and good practices. The present note provides general background and relevant information.

II. Relevant international normative frameworks and policy instruments

6. The Convention sets out clearly the definition and scope of full and effective participation in political and public life that should be guaranteed to persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others (article 29 (participation in political and public life)).

7. Specifically, article 29 stipulates that full and effective participation in political and public life includes:

(a) the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected;

(b) active promotion of an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others, and encouragement of their participation in public affairs.

8. Broadly, this entails participation in elections, both in the capacity to cast votes and to stand for elections as candidates, and to hold public office, as well as participation, including through representative organizations, in public decision-

⁵ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. 2024. *The Global State of Democracy 2024: Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty*.

⁶ See [A/HRC/59/44](#).

⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2025. *World Social Report 2025: A New Policy Consensus to Accelerate Social Progress*. United Nations.

making, including in the design and formulation, implementation and monitoring of laws and policies.

9. To achieve this, States Parties are obligated to ensure that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use; to protect the right of persons with disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections, without intimidation; and to permit persons with disabilities to receive personalized assistance of their own choice. Furthermore, States Parties must encourage the establishment and participation of organizations of persons with disabilities at all levels of governance: international, regional, national and local.

10. Other relevant provisions of the Convention include article 4.3, which stipulates that States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities.

11. Similarly, article 33 (national implementation and monitoring) mandates the involvement and full participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in the monitoring process of the implementation of the Convention.

12. Other relevant articles of the Convention are: article 6 (women with disabilities); article 8.2(c) (awareness-raising); article 9 (accessibility); article 12 (equality before the law); article 16 (freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse); article 21 (freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information); and article 32 (international cooperation).

13. There are numerous provisions from other human rights treaties that also bear relevance. Most fundamentally, participation in public life is recognized as both a principle and a right under international human rights law, as set out by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 21.

14. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights establishes in its article 25 the right and the opportunity of every citizen to take part in the conduct of public affairs, and to vote and be elected. Linked to this, article 19 (right to hold opinions and freedom of expression), article 21 (right of peaceful assembly) and article 22 (right to freedom of association) complement and contribute to the full and effective realization of article 25.⁸

15. In addition to civil and political rights, the implementation of social, economic and cultural rights, such as the right to health and the right to education, is essential for creating a conducive and enabling environment.⁹

16. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities elucidated the definition and scope of States Parties' obligations under articles 4.3 and 33.3 of the Convention in its general comment No. 7 (2018) ([CRPD/C/GC/7](#)).

17. The Committee has clarified that close consultation and active involvement of persons with disabilities, including through their representative organizations, should be facilitated across all levels of government and on all matters of public decision-making, ideally as a mandatory step prior to the approval of laws, regulations and policies, which should not be limited to disability-specific issues. Representative

⁸ See also the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, article 7; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, article 5(c); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 12.

⁹ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 24 (education) and article 25 (health).

organizations ought to reflect the wide diversity of persons with disabilities, as far as possible.¹⁰ Effective consultation and involvement requires access to all relevant information, through accessible formats and reasonable accommodation, including sign language interpretation, Braille, and Easy Read and plain language text.¹¹ Participation on an equal basis with others requires the accessibility of all processes and procedures of public decision-making and consultation, including the provision of reasonable accommodation and personalized support. In addition, the relevant physical facilities must also be accessible, including government buildings and public transportation.¹²

18. Furthermore, full and effective participation presupposes freedom from stigma and discrimination when expressing views, and protection from intimidation, harassment and reprisals.¹³

19. As regards representative organizations of persons with disabilities, States Parties should facilitate their capacity development and training in advocacy and leadership, as well as civic education on human rights and democratic governance norms and principles, and ensure that persons with disabilities are able to freely and easily establish and register organizations and seek and secure funding from donors.¹⁴

III. Current situation, challenges and opportunities

20. Evidence suggests that persons with disabilities are less likely to vote than their peers without disabilities, a situation termed the “disability gap”.¹⁵ During the European Parliament elections held in 2019, approximately 400,000 European Union citizens were unable to vote due to national laws restricting their right to vote on the basis of their disability.¹⁶ Similarly, persons with disabilities are underrepresented in public office and are less likely, for instance, to work as legislators.¹⁷ This underrepresentation also trickles down to the municipal and local levels.¹⁸

21. For the vast majority of persons with disabilities globally, socioeconomic conditions hinder their meaningful engagement, leadership and advocacy in political and public life, characterized by a lack of inclusive education, poverty-related disenfranchisement, unemployment or overrepresentation in the informal economy, and digital divides. This is coupled with a generally inaccessible physical environment and public space, evidenced by, for instance, inaccessible public transport, whereby universal design remains largely underutilized.¹⁹ Women with disabilities are also less likely to be represented in public office, with female politicians more likely to experience violence during election campaigns.²⁰

¹⁰ CRPD/C/GC/7, para. 15.

¹¹ Ibid., para. 22.

¹² Ibid., para. 45.

¹³ Ibid., paras. 27–29.

¹⁴ Ibid., paras. 60 and 61.

¹⁵ Teglbjærg, J. H., and others. 2022. The disability gap in voter turnout and its association to the accessibility of election information in EU countries. *Disability & Society*, 37(8).

¹⁶ European Disability Forum. 2022. *European Human Rights Report 2022*. Issue 6.

¹⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2024. *Disability and Development Report 2024*. United Nations.

¹⁸ Inputs provided by Humanity & Inclusion. 2026.

¹⁹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs. 2024. *Disability and Development Report 2024*. United Nations.

²⁰ Dube, Sifisosami. 2025. Disabled by social norms, not impairments: The frontiers and barriers for women with disabilities in politics. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

22. Furthermore, legal, environmental, physical, informational, communicational, attitudinal and financial barriers continue to be encountered by persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities in the exercise of their right to participation in public and political life.

23. A key legal barrier faced by persons with disabilities is the removal of their legal capacity, in violation of article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are disproportionately impacted by legal regimes that remove legal capacity based on disability; this frequently results in the right to vote or to stand in elections being denied, as well as disqualification from holding public office. Furthermore, these restrictions often come into force automatically following a determination of lack of legal capacity.²¹ Research indicates that women with disabilities and older persons with disabilities are also at heightened risk of having their legal capacity denied.²² In some jurisdictions, the determination that an individual lacks legal capacity is made by a medical professional, and in others by a judge, with limited or no process for appealing the decision or seeking redress.²³ Guardianship or other substituted decision-making regimes are still in place in several jurisdictions across all regions, which continue to restrict the right of persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life. Other legal barriers include the lack of legal recognition of national sign languages as official languages of States, which precludes deaf persons from holding public office.²⁴ In some jurisdictions, persons with disabilities placed in institutions may be subject to additional requirements to register to vote, such as obtaining a medical certificate.²⁵

24. There is a lack of sufficient range and options of accessible ballots and reasonable accommodation, alternative or early voting procedures, and information that responds to the needs and preferences of the diverse group of persons with disabilities.

25. Positive steps have been taken by some States Parties to improve the physical accessibility of polling booths, including through the installation of ramps;²⁶ nevertheless, voting at polling stations is still not a fully accessible process. For example, ballot papers present challenges, specifically in relation to their size, font and voting instructions; moreover, the use of assistive tools and the provision of sign language interpretation at polling booths remain far from standard practice and are not mandated across most jurisdictions.²⁷ Furthermore, lack of awareness and capacity among electoral staff, elections observers and other personnel regarding accessibility and reasonable accommodation is common, which is related to the lack of training.²⁸ Although alternative, more accessible means of voting, such as mobile voting and postal voting, have been rolled out in a number of jurisdictions, their

²¹ [A/HRC/19/36](#), para. 38.

²² [CRPD/C/GC/3](#), para. 44; see also [A/74/186](#).

²³ [A/HRC/19/36](#), para. 38.

²⁴ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2025. *Disability Quotas for Parliamentary Elections*. Warsaw. p. 11.

²⁵ Armin Rabitsch, Alejandro Moledo and Michael Lidauer. 2023. Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30(3), p. 540.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 543; Sightsavers. 2017. Disability-inclusive elections in Africa: a qualitative systematic review. pp. 20–24.

²⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, pp. 31–34. Available at: www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2025/day-general-discussion-and-call-written-submissions-article-29-convention.

availability tends to be limited, uneven or subject to restrictions.²⁹ Persons with disabilities living in rural or remote areas face particular challenges, as there are fewer polling stations available within a reasonable distance, compounded by a lack of free and accessible transportation.³⁰

26. Moreover, communicational and informational barriers significantly impact the right of persons with disabilities to be informed, as well as their access to practical information necessary to exercise their right to vote. Relevant information, such as election dates, the location of polling booths, the availability of alternative voting methods and related deadlines, is not generally provided in a sufficient range of accessible formats, including Easy Read, plain language, Braille and sign language. Information disseminated online is also frequently inaccessible or difficult to find. For instance, official websites of electoral management bodies, as well as political party websites, frequently do not meet web accessibility standards and guidelines, and nor do relevant materials posted online, such as party manifestos.³¹

27. Addressing the accessibility challenges regarding information is key to enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process. Brazil has adopted legislation mandating public broadcasters to provide sign language interpretation and audio description during official announcements and televised debates throughout the election cycle.³²

28. Furthermore, the extent of accessibility of the voting process has an impact on the right of persons with disabilities to cast their vote in secret. Specifically, requests for personalized assistance or support should not compromise the secrecy and confidentiality of the vote, by guaranteeing that persons with disabilities exercise free choice in who assists them, in accordance with the Convention.³³ Lack of knowledge and understanding of this right by election officials present at polling stations, coupled with stigma and discriminatory attitudes, may lead to arbitrary denials of assistance and even expose persons with disabilities to undue interference by others attempting to influence their vote; blind persons, persons with disabilities living in institutions and persons with intellectual disabilities are at particular risk in this regard.³⁴ In certain jurisdictions, legal provisions may restrict persons with disabilities' exercise of free choice in who will assist them; for instance, electoral laws or regulations may only permit an election official to assist persons with disabilities to cast their vote, or may restrict the number of persons who may be assisted.³⁵

29. In relation to standing as candidates during elections and holding public office, persons with disabilities still confront attitudinal barriers. Stigma and discriminatory attitudes, stereotypes and beliefs persist, particularly regarding persons with intellectual disabilities and persons with psychosocial disabilities, who are too often perceived as less competent, unstable or unable to withstand the demands and

²⁹ Armin Rabitsch, Alejandro Moledo and Michael Lidauer. 2023. Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30(3), p. 541.

³⁰ OHCHR. 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; Sightsavers. 2017. *Disability-inclusive elections in Africa: a qualitative systematic review*, p. 23.

³¹ [A/HRC/61/46](#), para. 47.

³² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. 2025. *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas con discapacidad en las Américas*, para. 196.

³³ See [CRPD/C/GC/7](#).

³⁴ European Disability Forum. 2022. *European Human Rights Report*. Issue 6, pp. 77–82.

³⁵ Armin Rabitsch, Alejandro Moledo and Michael Lidauer. 2023. Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30(3), pp. 547 and 548.

responsibilities of holding public office.³⁶ Throughout the elections cycle, lack of accessibility of venues for meetings, campaign events and other gatherings, such as rallies, is a common occurrence; this presents challenges for persons with mobility impairments, as well as deaf persons due to the frequent absence of sign language interpretation or live captioning during online events.³⁷ Moreover, persons with disabilities, owing to the socioeconomic disparities and disadvantages that disproportionately affect them, have limited financial resources available to launch and sustain an election campaign of wide outreach. This is compounded by the general lack of public funds available to support persons with disabilities to cover the costs of campaigning and their support needs.³⁸

30. Although data remain extremely limited, it could be argued that a significant factor limiting the political representation of persons with disabilities is the absence of quotas for persons with disabilities. Quotas can be employed as affirmative action measures aimed at eliminating discrimination and fostering inclusion³⁹ and may take the following forms: reserved seats in State legislatures and local councils; legislative quotas, whereby a certain percentage of candidate lists are allocated to persons with disabilities during parliamentary elections; and party quotas, whereby political parties assign a number of seats to candidates with disabilities.⁴⁰ Reserved seats and legislative quotas are prescribed by law, whereas party quotas are voluntary. The potential of quotas to translate into actual representation depends on a number of factors, such as the existence of compliance mechanisms and the extent of political parties' willingness to back electoral candidates with disabilities.⁴¹ Nevertheless, a promising trend is emerging in Africa, where a number of countries have instituted reserved seats in legislatures for persons with disabilities.⁴² In addition, legislative quotas were introduced in Kazakhstan in 2023, which led to tangible legislative and political gains, most notably the adoption of legislation ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2023.⁴³

31. Nevertheless, quotas alone are not sufficient to cultivate and develop the leadership of persons with disabilities, and risk becoming merely a box-ticking exercise.⁴⁴ When in office, persons with disabilities frequently do not receive adequate support and reasonable accommodation, and may be forced to resort to their own personal funds to ensure personalized assistance to fulfil their functions in public office, placing them at a structural disadvantage compared to their peers without disabilities.⁴⁵ The lack of accessibility of public and government buildings is also an ongoing challenge.⁴⁶ In certain jurisdictions, access to social protection benefits may be limited or withdrawn upon entering public office, which disproportionately impacts persons with disabilities who have additional disability-related costs.⁴⁷

³⁶ OHCHR. 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, pp. 12 and 13.

³⁷ Tan, W., and Zhuang, K. V. 2025. Election information accessibility for disabled people during Singapore's 2025 general election. *Disability & Society*.

³⁸ European Disability Forum. 2022. *European Human Rights Report*. Issue 6, p. 42.

³⁹ See article 5.4 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

⁴⁰ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2025. *Disability Quotas for Parliamentary Elections*. Warsaw.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24 and 25.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–30.

⁴⁴ [A/HRC/61/46](#), para. 44.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 45.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 49.

⁴⁷ OHCHR. 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, pp. 70, 74 and 75.

32. Young persons with disabilities are particularly affected by inaccessible party-political structures and the general dearth of leadership, mentorship and capacity-building opportunities and pathways for entering politics. This exclusion is compounded by the lack of inclusive education, low educational attainment and the absence of other skills training for youth with disabilities.⁴⁸

33. Similarly, barriers persist to the meaningful inclusion, participation and engagement of persons with disabilities in the conduct of public affairs and decision-making on an equal basis with others, including through organizations of persons with disabilities and representative organizations. Overall, consultation processes are not accessible, with a general lack of reasonable accommodations being provided; the buildings and spaces such processes are held in are also largely physically inaccessible; and informational and communicational barriers further prevent persons with disabilities and their representative organizations from fully participating and contributing to consultation processes on an equal basis with others.⁴⁹ Consultation processes generally lack clearly defined policy and operational frameworks embedding transparency, accountability and feedback mechanisms, including mandatory consultation instituted at each stage of policy formulation.⁵⁰ There is also a notable lack of disability mainstreaming in policy action, which excludes organizations of persons with disabilities and persons with disabilities from being consulted on key issues that not only affect their lives but may also disproportionately impact them, including at international forums, such as on climate change.⁵¹ Ensuring the right to consultation and the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous persons with disabilities is one of the most important principles that can protect their right to full and effective participation in decisions affecting them, yet the specific needs of Indigenous persons with disabilities are frequently not considered or met in these situations.⁵²

34. Although research indicates that organizations of persons with disabilities and representative organizations are being consulted more frequently and on a broader range of issues beyond disability-specific concerns, there is dissatisfaction as to the quality, robustness and effectiveness of consultation processes and mechanisms.⁵³ Deafblind persons, persons with intellectual disabilities, persons with psychosocial disabilities, and hard-of-hearing persons are involved to a much lesser extent in consultation processes.⁵⁴ Identifying and accessing stable, sustainable sources of funding, including from donors abroad, is a continuing challenge for organizations of persons with disabilities, as is the lack of financial and human resources overall to fully engage and participate in consultation processes.⁵⁵

35. In some jurisdictions, persons with disabilities encounter restrictive registration requirements and overly burdensome administrative obstacles to establish an organization of persons with disabilities, limiting their right to freedom of association. These restrictions are especially pronounced for persons with intellectual

⁴⁸ United Nations Youth Office and others. 2024. *Believe in Better: Shaping the future through the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities*, pp. 61–63.

⁴⁹ International Disability Alliance (IDA). 2022. *Not just ticking the disability box? Meaningful OPD participation and the risk of tokenism*.

⁵⁰ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. 2025. *Situación de los derechos humanos de las personas con discapacidad en las Américas*, para. 205.

⁵¹ DICARP, IDA and RIADIS. 2025. *Disability Rights in Climate Policies. 2025 Status Report*.

⁵² [A/HRC/57/47](#), paras. 52 and 53.

⁵³ IDA. 2022. *Not just ticking the disability box? Meaningful OPD participation and the risk of tokenism*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–66.

disabilities, persons with psychosocial disabilities and autistic persons.⁵⁶ Persons with disabilities from Indigenous or ethnic minority backgrounds may also face exclusion within larger, broad-based organizations of persons with disabilities, where persons with disabilities from the dominant socioeconomic or ethnic group hold leadership positions.⁵⁷ Opportunities for leadership, mentorship and advocacy training for young people with disabilities are limited within organizations of persons with disabilities, which tend to sideline youth agendas and perspectives.⁵⁸ Women and girls with disabilities face barriers related to gender-based discrimination, where gender within the disability rights movement may be treated as a separate issue of secondary importance or relevance. Girls with disabilities may face additional barriers to engaging in advocacy due to overprotection from family members, stemming from stigma and feelings of shame, or restrictive sociocultural gender norms.⁵⁹ In terms of cross-movement coalition-building, available evidence indicates that persons with disabilities tend to be underrepresented in women's rights advocacy.⁶⁰ Stigma and discrimination within civil society spaces disproportionately impact persons with disabilities facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination; for instance, research indicates that LGBT+ persons with disabilities encounter discriminatory attitudes both within the disability rights movement and LGBT+ organizations.⁶¹

36. Nevertheless, the Together for Inclusion consortium is a positive example of cross-movement and cross-border collaboration between organizations of persons with disabilities and other civil society organizations. The consortium's advocacy resulted in a tangible legislative win with the adoption of the 2024 Disability Act in Mozambique.⁶² Furthermore, joint judicial activism by organizations of persons with disabilities and civil society led to the recognition of the right to vote for approximately 600,000 European Union citizens with disabilities,⁶³ while in the Republic of Korea, such activism led to a court ruling guaranteeing voting assistance to persons with intellectual disabilities.⁶⁴

37. As public and political life becomes increasingly digitalized, it is vital that persons with disabilities have full access to digital technologies and are able to participate in online spaces on an equal basis with others. However, digital technologies and online spaces are frequently inaccessible, and the digital divide may also disproportionately exclude persons with disabilities living in least developed countries and rural areas.⁶⁵

38. Social media platforms can be empowering for persons with disabilities, enabling them to represent their own views and lived experiences; however, the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation and the recycling and

⁵⁶ OHCHR. 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, pp. 64 and 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 50 and 51.

⁵⁸ United Nations Youth Office and others. 2024. *Believe in Better: Shaping the future through the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities*, p. 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 57–59.

⁶⁰ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). 2019. The empowerment of women and girls with disabilities: Towards full and effective participation.

⁶¹ Kempapidis, T., and others. 2024. Queer and Disabled: Exploring the Experiences of People Who Identify as LGBT and Live with Disabilities. *Disabilities*, 4(1).

⁶² Inputs provided by Atlas Alliance. 2026.

⁶³ Armin Rabitsch, Alejandro Moledo and Michael Lidauer. 2023. Inclusive elections? The case of persons with disabilities in the European Union, *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30(3), pp. 548–549.

⁶⁴ Inputs provided by Korea Council of Centers for Independent Living. 2026.

⁶⁵ [A/79/372](#), paras. 29 and 30.

perpetuating of negative or harmful attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes surrounding disability in a closed feedback loop – due to the functioning of algorithms creating “echo chamber effects”⁶⁶ – poses significant risks to the right of persons with disabilities to participate in public and political life. Although data remain limited, research indicates that persons with disabilities are disproportionately exposed to a higher risk of hate speech, violence and abuse within the digital environment, which may lead persons with disabilities to withdraw from online spaces altogether.⁶⁷ Recent research indicates that parliamentarians from marginalized communities, including persons with disabilities, report higher levels of harassment and violence online; the risk is heightened for individuals with intersecting identities, such as women with disabilities.⁶⁸

39. The mass media is an important tool for the public to remain informed and thereby hold government and State institutions accountable. Additionally, the media is vital in providing a forum for public and open debate, particularly during elections. It plays a key role in the dissemination of public national awareness-raising campaigns and it has the ability to shape to a significant extent societal perceptions, views and attitudes, including on persons with disabilities.⁶⁹ Yet, representation of disability and persons with disabilities in the media and within media organizations is woefully inadequate.⁷⁰ Overall, media coverage in news content and programming on issues related to disability is scarce. When persons with disabilities do receive coverage, this is often limited to narrow, disability-specific concerns, and frequently presents the community of persons with disabilities as a monolithic group, failing to account for the vast diversity of backgrounds, impairments, needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities.⁷¹ Furthermore, persons with disabilities are rarely invited on news programmes as experts on a wide range of issues relating to public life, with accessibility features and reasonable accommodation provided only on an exceptional basis.⁷² This exclusion is further compounded by the overall inaccessibility of media content and services; the absence of inclusive programming policies and editorial guidelines within media organizations; lack of knowledge and use of disability-sensitive, culturally appropriate language and terminology that reflects the diversity and preferences of persons with disabilities; and underrepresentation of persons with disabilities employed in media organizations and outlets.⁷³

40. Moreover, media coverage, where it exists, is generally characterized by stereotypical, reductionist representations of disability, with portrayals of persons with disabilities as either helpless victims and burdens on society, or as heroic achievers who have managed to “overcome” their disability.⁷⁴ In this way, biased media representation risks reinforcing and perpetuating harmful attitudes, stereotypes

⁶⁶ Hungerford, C. and others. 2025. Autism, Stereotypes, and Stigma: The Impact of Media Representations. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 46(3).

⁶⁷ [A/HRC/56/31](#), paras. 7 and 8.

⁶⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2026. *When the public turns hostile: Political violence against parliamentarians*.

⁶⁹ UNESCO. 2023. Building media capacities to establish linkages between diversity, equality and inclusion for persons with disabilities.

⁷⁰ UNESCO. 2024. Disability equality in the media: representation, accessibility, management. Practical manual.

⁷¹ UNESCO. 2023. Building media capacities to establish linkages between diversity, equality and inclusion for persons with disabilities.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ UNESCO. 2024. Disability equality in the media: representation, accessibility, management. Practical manual.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

and behaviours towards persons with disabilities⁷⁵ and fostering negative perceptions of their fitness to participate in public and political life and to assume leadership positions. This is particularly pertinent when persons with disabilities seek a position in public office during elections or when they hold such a position.⁷⁶

IV. Recommendations for the way forward

41. As we mark the twentieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, States Parties must make efforts to ensure the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities, including through their representative organizations and organizations of persons with disabilities, as leaders, decision-makers and advocates. This is indispensable to the realization of the rights enshrined in the Convention.

42. On the basis of the challenges and opportunities identified, accessible civic engagement, leadership and advocacy of persons with disabilities in political and public life can be enhanced through:

(a) Legislative and policy reform: repeal legal provisions removing legal capacity and imposing disability-based restrictions on the right to vote, to stand as candidates in elections and to hold public office; remove guardianship and substituted decision-making regimes; consider legislative reforms to institute affirmative action measures, such as reserved seats and legislative quotas, for persons with disabilities; consider policy reform to address the public participation of persons with disabilities in national disability inclusion strategies and policy action plans; undertake legislative or policy reform to improve the physical accessibility of public buildings, including polling stations, of public information and communications and of public transport, including through the adoption of universal design;

(b) Electoral management bodies: ensure accessibility of polling stations and of electoral information; institute mandatory training of electoral staff, elections observers and other relevant personnel on the human rights-based model of disability and the Convention, accessibility and reasonable accommodation; consider adopting and implementing alternative and early voting methods and processes, including for persons with disabilities living in rural or remote areas, and ensure monitoring and evaluation to measure effectiveness, in close consultation with persons with disabilities; launch nation-wide awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of persons with disabilities to participate in political and public life, including the right to vote, to stand in elections as candidates and to hold public office, on accessibility, and on debunking negative attitudes and stereotypes surrounding disability; develop and implement civic education programmes and materials that promote the human-rights based model of disability and the rights of persons with disabilities with respect to political participation, and ensure their wide dissemination in a range of accessible formats;

(c) Political parties: consider adopting party quotas for persons with disabilities; ensure accessibility of party venues and campaign events, as well as relevant information on electoral and candidate lists, party manifestos and voting, both online and offline; consider undertaking gender and disability-sensitive political campaigns, with an effort to ensure that politicians with disabilities, including female politicians, are able to campaign safely and on an equal basis with others; take into

⁷⁵ Hungerford, C., and others. 2025. Autism, Stereotypes, and Stigma: The Impact of Media Representations. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 46(3).

⁷⁶ OHCHR. 2025. Analytical report on the written contributions to the day of general discussion on article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, p. 67.

consideration disability- and accessibility-related costs in fundraising efforts and initiatives to adequately support candidates with disabilities; set up and develop leadership and capacity-building training, as well as mentorship opportunities for persons with disabilities, including young people with disabilities, women with disabilities and other underrepresented groups; cultivate partnerships and collaboration with organizations of persons with disabilities to understand and reflect the perspectives and priorities of persons with disabilities, in all their diversity, as a large constituency of the electorate, to meaningfully shape party positions and policies;

(d) Consultation processes: ensure accessibility of premises and information; establish frameworks for regular consultation with persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities at every stage of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of laws and policies; and embed feedback mechanisms within consultation processes to ensure transparency and accountability, thereby increasing the robustness, legitimacy and effectiveness of these processes;

(e) Organizations of persons with disabilities: remove legal and regulatory restrictions or burdensome registration requirements that impede the establishment of organizations of persons with disabilities; identify stable, sustainable sources of funding for such organizations, including from international donors; institute capacity-building and advocacy skills development training and opportunities, particularly aimed at underrepresented groups within the disability rights movement, such as young people, women and girls, Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, LGBT+ persons, and persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities;

(f) Media: ensure accessibility of content and media spaces, in close consultation with persons with disabilities; mainstream disability into existing editorial guidelines and codes of ethics to ensure inclusive programming; promote and implement capacity-building and sensitization training within media organizations on the human rights-based model of disability and the Convention, accessibility and reasonable accommodation; promote the use of disability-sensitive, culturally appropriate language and terminology in media content and debunk negative attitudes and stereotypes surrounding disability.

V. Guiding questions for discussion by the panel

43. The following set of guiding questions is suggested for the panel and participants of the round-table discussion under the agenda item “Matters related to the implementation of the Convention”, taking into account the overarching theme, “The Convention at 20: celebrating and consolidating achievements and shaping the next phase of implementation in a changing world”:

(a) What are the main gaps and challenges in ensuring accessible, meaningful and inclusive engagement, advocacy and leadership of persons with disabilities within the civic space?

(b) What are examples of successful initiatives, policies or interventions that have addressed major gaps and barriers to the political participation and representation of persons with disabilities? What has worked well, and what still needs to change?

(c) How can societal stereotypes, discriminatory attitudes and negative perceptions about persons with disabilities be effectively challenged? What strategies or approaches have proven successful in raising public awareness about their advocacy and leadership roles?

(d) What are the roles and responsibilities of Governments, international institutions, organizations of persons with disabilities, civil society and the private sector in strengthening the civic and political engagement of persons with disabilities, in line with the Convention and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?
