

LEADERSHIP AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

What's the Issue?

An estimated one in five women live with a disability. Historically, their equal participation and inclusion in society has been hindered by systemic marginalization and structural barriers, which often lead to less access to: education, health care (including sexual and reproductive health), information, public services, justice as well as less participation in civic and political processes and decision-making.

Women still represent a minority of decision-makers worldwide, and there is no official data on the representation of women with disabilities in political decision-making.

Recognizing that women's equal political participation and representation is the key to achieving sustainable development, most countries in the world have agreed to reach "gender balance" in decision-making, including in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. Yet today, only 24 per cent of the world's parliamentarians are women. Only 6 per cent of Heads of State and 5 per cent of Heads of Government are women. In short, women's voices are missing.

More than 10 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, significant gaps continue between commitments and action to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities. Nonetheless, some women with disabilities are playing a prominent role in the public sphere, demonstrating their capacity and transformative role in political leadership.

Actions

UN Women's programmes on leadership and political participation are guided by commitments to women's representation, 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, and the Sustainable Development Goals which measure progress towards gender equality in part by the share of women in national parliaments and local government.

In coordination with national and UN partners, UN Women has supported the promotion of inclusive electoral processes and the political participation of women with disabilities. This support includes:

- 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, 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.



How we make a difference

MOLDOVA: In 2017, UN Women supported a comprehensive capacity-building programme to enhance the civic and political leadership skills of 39 women with different types of disabilities. It culminated with a National Forum of Women with Disabilities, “We have abilities – we want possibilities!” involving the Prime Minister, ministerial representatives and parliamentarians. Speaking from personal experience, women trained through the programme publicly advocated for greater support for entrepreneurship, access to education and protection of reproductive rights for women with disabilities. This led to the launch of a Women with Disabilities Network composed of over 100 women with disabilities from across the country. This effort was further supported by a national media campaign on intersectionality in 2019, which portrayed the benefits of including women with disabilities in politics, as well as the development of a new guide on how to run for local office using tactile signs. At least 12 of the programme participants have expressed plans to run for local office in Moldova’s upcoming local elections.

UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA: As part of efforts to improve the participation and representation of women, youth and persons with disabilities as leaders in political processes, UN Women helped strengthen gender mainstreaming and inclusive electoral management and processes in coordination with UN partners ahead of the 2015 election. Consideration for persons with disabilities led to the introduction of a tactile ballot system for the first time, and specific arrangements to ensure polling stations and information were accessible. In 2017, building on the results and partnerships with networks of people with disabilities UN Women supported reviews of discriminatory legislative frameworks, contributing to the enactment of the Legal Aid Act which formalized legal aid services, a key indicator for access to justice to women and girls, especially women with disabilities and the elderly, who have less access to legal support.

TUNISIA: UN Women supported civil society advocacy efforts, which led to the adoption of legal requirements for horizontal parity in local election candidate lists in 2017. An historic 47 per cent of women were elected to local council positions following the May 2018 elections. The Organic Law n° 2017-7 also mandates that a woman or man candidate with a physical disability and status as a ‘handicap card-holder’ must be included among the top 10 of each candidate list. A total of 18 candidates with disabilities, including five women and 13 men, headed candidate lists.

The FACTS AND FIGURES

- Women with disabilities are severely underrepresented in decision-making: while both women and men with disabilities are underrepresented, evidence from 19 countries in 2017 shows that only 2.3 per cent of women with disabilities compared to 2.8 per cent of men with disabilities held a position as a legislator, senior official or manager. According to 2017 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; and in the other four countries, the share of women parliamentarians with disabilities ranged from 0.3 to 6.3 per cent.
- Women with disabilities are underrepresented in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters: across 17 countries or areas from the Asia and Pacific region in 2017, organizations of persons with disabilities included nearly twice as many men as women – representing 21 per cent and 12 per cent of all mechanisms respectively. In other types of organizations, men were similarly overrepresented – making up 43 per cent of all mechanism members, versus 24 per cent for women.
- Women with disabilities are underrepresented in gender equality institutions: in 7 of those same 17 countries, national machineries for gender equality included no women with disabilities among their membership, and in the remaining five countries, only 9 per cent of members were women with disabilities.
- Fewer women lead organizations of persons with disabilities: social media data analysed in 2017 indicated that 42 per cent of women versus 58 per cent of men held leaderships positions in Spanish-speaking organizations working on disability issues or with persons with disabilities.

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

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