

# 68<sup>TH</sup> COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

**Overcoming the barriers to the involvement of  
women with disabilities in politics**

## **CWP AND CPwD JOINT WORKSHOP RESEARCH BRIEFING**

By Aqsa Latif



## Contents

Executive Summary .....	2
1. Introduction: The Intersection of Gender and Disability .....	3
2. Barriers to Political Involvement: A Multi-Dimensional Challenge .....	4
3. Strategies to Overcome Barriers: A Path to Inclusion.....	7
4. Social and Political Implications: Why Inclusion Matters .....	9
5. Conclusion and Recommendations: A Collective Responsibility .....	10
Conclusion .....	11
Alphabetical Reference List.....	12

## Executive Summary

The political exclusion of women with disabilities represents a profound challenge to democratic integrity and equitable participation across the Commonwealth. This comprehensive report, drawing on research from the last five years, synthesises key findings on the systemic and multi-faceted barriers that women with disabilities face in their pursuit of political influence and office. It provides a detailed analysis of the intersectional challenges of gender and disability, revealing how these individuals are disproportionately hindered by a complex interplay of physical, social, economic, and institutional obstacles. The report identifies a spectrum of barriers, ranging from inaccessible voting and parliamentary infrastructure to pervasive discriminatory attitudes, a chronic lack of political support, and the debilitating intersectional challenges of gender and disability. These hurdles are further exacerbated by the social and economic inequalities that women with disabilities endure, which fundamentally limit their ability to build political networks, access vital resources, and campaign effectively.

Crucially, the report finds that while these barriers are formidable, a growing number of successful strategies have been developed and implemented to overcome them. It highlights the pivotal role of **disability-inclusive policies**, such as legislated quotas and accessibility mandates, in creating a more level playing field for participation. Furthermore, it examines the transformative power of targeted support networks, mentoring programmes, and capacity-building initiatives that empower women with disabilities with the essential skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate the complex political landscape. Ultimately, the report argues that increasing the political

participation of women with disabilities is not merely a matter of social justice but a pragmatic necessity for creating more inclusive, representative, and effective public policy. Their lived experiences provide unique, invaluable insights that can inform and shape legislation on disability rights, gender equality, and social inclusion.

This document offers a set of detailed, actionable recommendations for governments, political parties, and civil society organisations to proactively promote the political inclusion of women with disabilities. By committing to these recommendations, Commonwealth nations can move closer to achieving a truly representative democracy where all voices are heard, and no one is left behind.

---

## 1. Introduction: The Intersection of Gender and Disability in Politics

Democracy, at its very core, is the principle of government by the people. Yet, for a significant portion of the global population, the promise of full and equal political participation remains frustratingly unrealised. This is particularly true for women with disabilities, who stand at the crossroads of two major forms of systemic discrimination: gender bias and ableism. Their political marginalisation is a pressing issue that demands urgent attention from policymakers, civil society, and political leaders alike. This report provides a comprehensive examination of the barriers they face and the innovative strategies being employed to dismantle these obstacles. It is grounded in recent studies and case studies from both developed and developing Commonwealth countries, providing a nuanced and up-to-date analysis that goes beyond generalisations.

For the purposes of this report, a clear understanding of key terms is essential:

- **Women with Disabilities:** This term refers to individuals who identify as women and have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2024). This definition is deliberately broad and inclusive, acknowledging the diverse range of lived experiences within this community.
- **Political Inclusion:** This concept extends beyond simply having the right to vote. It signifies the full and meaningful participation of women with disabilities as voters, candidates, elected officials, and active members of civil society who can influence policy, hold office, and shape the political agenda (UNDP, 2021). It is about substantive, not merely token, representation. The CPA's Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) network, a community of disabled

Members and parliamentary staff, was established to champion and increase the representation of people with disabilities in Commonwealth legislatures, providing a vital platform for their voices to be heard.

- **Accessibility:** In a political context, accessibility refers to ensuring that all aspects of the political process - from voter registration and polling stations to party meetings and parliamentary buildings - are usable by and welcoming to people with disabilities. This includes physical, communication, and attitudinal accessibility (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2022). True accessibility is a dynamic and ongoing process, not a one-off solution.

Despite representing an estimated 15% of the global population, persons with disabilities are starkly underrepresented in political life, and women with disabilities face a double disadvantage, with a recent analysis finding that only a small fraction of elected officials globally disclose a disability, and an even smaller percentage are women (Centenary Action, 2025). A 2021 study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) found that while there has been a global increase in women's political representation, this progress has largely bypassed women with disabilities, leaving them on the periphery of power. Their absence from decision-making bodies is not an accident; it is the outcome of a complex interplay of physical, social, and economic barriers that this report will analyse in detail.

---

## 2. Barriers to Political Involvement: A Multi-Dimensional Challenge

The journey for women with disabilities to become politically involved is fraught with obstacles that are often invisible to those without lived experience. These barriers are not isolated but interconnected, creating a formidable system of exclusion that compounds disadvantage and reinforces marginalisation.

### 2.1. Physical and Infrastructural Obstacles

**Physical accessibility** remains a fundamental and often insurmountable barrier. This includes the design of political spaces, from the constituency office to the national Parliament (Centenary Action, 2022).

- **Inaccessible Venues:** A study by the **International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)** found that in many countries, polling stations, town halls, and party meeting venues are located in buildings that lack ramps, accessible toilets, or elevators (IFES, 2022). A separate report found that even in countries with

supposed accessibility standards, poorly lit and inaccessible polling stations remain a widespread issue, particularly in developing nations, where infrastructure is often not a priority for marginalised communities (Drabarz, 2024). This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women with physical disabilities to participate in the most basic democratic functions, such as casting a vote or attending a public meeting.

- **Parliamentary Buildings:** The physical infrastructure of Parliaments themselves can be a major deterrent. Many historical parliamentary buildings were not designed with accessibility in mind, and renovations can be slow and costly. This can hinder a Parliamentarian's ability to navigate the building independently, access their office, or even participate in a vote on the main chamber floor. The lack of sign language interpreters, Braille documents, and accessible digital formats further excludes women with hearing or visual impairments from fully participating in legislative proceedings, often forcing them to rely on the goodwill of colleagues to access vital information (University of Bath, 2024). However, an article in *The Parliamentarian* offers '*A blueprint for E-Parliaments*', suggesting that digital solutions, such as accessible online documents and remote participation tools, can help overcome these physical and logistical barriers, making parliamentary work more inclusive for all.

Beyond the physical structures, the pace and nature of political life, including long hours, spontaneous meetings, and extensive travel, are often not conducive to the needs of individuals with disabilities, creating another layer of practical exclusion. Acknowledging this, the CPA has developed its 'Disability Inclusive Communications Guidelines', which provides actionable guidance on how Parliaments can enhance their communications and facilities to be more accessible.

## 2.2. Social and Attitudinal Obstacles

Beyond the physical, deeply ingrained social and cultural prejudices act as powerful gatekeepers (Centenary Action, 2022). These attitudes are often the most difficult to dismantle as they are rooted in long-held societal norms and ignorance.

- **Discriminatory Attitudes:** Pervasive **stereotypes** about the capabilities and intelligence of persons with disabilities lead to a lack of confidence from voters, political parties, and even family members (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2023). Women with disabilities are often viewed as dependents rather than as capable leaders, and their political ambitions are frequently dismissed as unrealistic

(GOV.UK, 2021). These attitudes manifest in a lack of media coverage, a patronising tone in interviews, or being questioned on their personal life rather than their political platform. Candidates may also face questions about their capacity to handle the stress of public office, a line of questioning rarely directed at their non-disabled counterparts.

- **Gendered Ableism:** The intersection of gender and disability creates a unique form of prejudice (UN Women, 2023). Women with disabilities are often hypersexualised or desexualised in a way that their male counterparts are not. They may face scrutiny over their ability to be both a mother and a politician, while their male counterparts with disabilities are more readily celebrated for their resilience and leadership (Social Development Direct, 2023). This intersectional bias can also manifest as women with disabilities being expected to be passive and grateful for any political opportunity, rather than being seen as equally deserving of leadership roles.

### 2.3. Economic and Institutional Obstacles

The financial and institutional structures of politics are often not designed to support women with disabilities (Centenary Action, 2022).

- **Financial Disadvantage:** Women with disabilities are, on average, more likely to experience poverty and unemployment, making it incredibly difficult to fund a political campaign, which requires significant financial resources for travel, advertising, and staff (UN Women, 2023). They may also face additional costs for mobility aids, personal assistants, or other support, which further widens the economic gap (Centenary Action, 2022). The fear of losing disability benefits or social security payments by earning a political salary is a very real and common deterrent for potential candidates (GOV.UK, 2021).
- **Lack of Political Support:** Political parties are often reluctant to field candidates with disabilities, fearing they are not "electable" or that they will be a liability. Women with disabilities are less likely to be placed on party lists in winnable seats, and they often lack access to the informal networks and mentorship that are crucial for political success (Global Network of Women with Disabilities, 2022). A study on political participation in Cameroon found that a significant majority of people with disabilities are not members of a political party, indicating a systemic disconnect between these organisations and the disability community



(Sightsavers, 2020). Furthermore, party selection processes are often not accessible, requiring candidates to attend multiple in-person meetings without reasonable adjustments.

---

### 3. Strategies to Overcome Barriers: A Path to Inclusion

While the barriers are significant, a growing body of evidence points to successful strategies that have helped women with disabilities enter and thrive in political life. These initiatives require a multi-level approach, engaging governments, political parties, and civil society.

#### 3.1. Legislative and Policy Reforms

Legislated policy changes are a critical first step in creating a more inclusive political environment.

- **Quotas and Reserved Seats:** In countries like **Uganda** and **Rwanda**, legislated quotas for persons with disabilities have been instrumental in ensuring their representation. The Ugandan Parliament has five reserved seats for persons with disabilities, and these seats have been instrumental in electing women with disabilities who have gone on to champion disability rights legislation (UNDP, 2021). This provides a guaranteed entry point that bypasses the traditional gatekeeping of political parties. In other contexts, voluntary quotas at the party level have also proven effective in increasing the number of candidates with disabilities on the ballot.
- **Disability-Inclusive Electoral Policies:** The **Commonwealth of Australia** has made significant strides in electoral accessibility by providing accessible polling places, at-home voting options, and telephone voting for people with vision impairment (Australian Electoral Commission, 2023). The **Electoral Commission of Kenya** has also piloted programmes to make voter registration and education more accessible to persons with disabilities (Electoral Commission of Kenya, 2022). These legislative and policy shifts are essential for removing systemic obstacles to political participation (UN, 2024).

#### 3.2. Targeted Support Networks and Capacity Building

Beyond legislation, practical support and skills development are crucial for empowering women with disabilities to succeed (Centenary Action, 2022).

- **Mentoring and Leadership Programmes:** Organisations like the **Global Network of Women with Disabilities (GNWD)** have launched mentoring programmes that connect aspiring female politicians with disabilities to women who are already in positions of power. These programmes provide crucial advice on campaigning, public speaking, and managing the unique challenges of public life. In Moldova, UN Women launched a multi-year capacity-building initiative that led to the successful election of six women with disabilities as local councillors, demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted support (European Disability Forum, 2024). These efforts are often formalised through international collaborations. An article in *The Parliamentarian* titled 'Parliamentary Learning from Peer Networks: Best Practices from Global Experience', for example, highlights how peer-to-peer mentoring and skills training are vital for empowering aspiring and new politicians, equipping them with the practical tools to overcome political barriers
- **Financial and Logistical Support:** Political parties and civil society organisations should create dedicated funds to support the campaigns of women with disabilities. This funding should cover not only traditional campaign costs but also specific disability-related expenses, such as the cost of personal assistants, sign language interpreters, or accessible transportation (Centenary Action, 2022). The absence of such support is a major barrier, with studies showing that the fear of losing disability benefits is a common deterrent for potential candidates (GOV.UK, 2021).

### 3.3. Public and Media Awareness

Changing public perceptions is a long-term but vital strategy.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** The **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)** has run several campaigns to increase the visibility of persons with disabilities in the media, portraying them as capable and effective leaders rather than as objects of pity. By normalising the sight of women with disabilities in positions of power, these campaigns help to shift public attitudes and build confidence among voters (Centenary Action, 2025). Social media, in particular, has emerged as a critical tool for disability advocacy groups to challenge stereotypes and influence public opinion, often reaching audiences that traditional media cannot (ResearchGate, 2022).
- **Media Training for Politicians with Disabilities:** Providing women with disabilities with media training can help them effectively communicate their message and push back against patronising or discriminatory questions from



journalists. Studies show that when empowered, people with disabilities can use social media to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and build their own political platforms and public profiles (Coventry University, 2023).

---

## 4. Social and Political Implications: Why Inclusion Matters

The inclusion of women with disabilities in politics is not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic one that brings tangible benefits to governance and society as a whole.

### 4.1. Inclusive Policymaking and Substantive Representation

The presence of women with disabilities in Parliament ensures that policies are designed with their lived experiences in mind, leading to more relevant and impactful legislation.

- **Case Study: New Zealand:** The **New Zealand Parliament**, following a concerted effort to increase diversity, has seen a rise in the number of Parliamentarians with disabilities. This has led to more robust debates and legislation on issues such as accessible public transport, inclusive education, and employment rights for persons with disabilities (Global Disability Summit, 2025). When a diverse group of people sits at the table, they can identify blind spots in policy that would otherwise be missed, ensuring that new laws do not inadvertently create new barriers for disabled people.
- **The Power of Lived Experience:** A study by the UNDP (2021) found that when women with disabilities are in a position of power, they are more likely to champion and pass legislation related to disability rights and gender equality. This is not just about having a voice; it is about having the power to shape the legislative agenda in a way that genuinely benefits their communities, leading to more inclusive and effective governance (University of Bath, 2024). This is the difference between descriptive and substantive representation: where a policy is not just about disability, but is genuinely informed by the reality of living with a disability.

### 4.2. Enhanced Democratic Legitimacy and Societal Equality

A truly representative democracy is one that reflects the diversity of its population. The political inclusion of women with disabilities strengthens democratic institutions from the ground up.

- **Strengthening Democracy:** The inclusion of women with disabilities enhances the legitimacy of democratic institutions by demonstrating that they are truly for

everyone (Commonwealth Disability Persons' Forum, 2025). When citizens with disabilities see themselves reflected in their leaders, it increases their trust in the political process and encourages greater civic engagement. This leads to a virtuous cycle where more participation leads to better policies, which in turn inspires even greater participation.

- **Changing Societal Norms:** The visibility of women with disabilities in leadership roles sends a powerful message to society, challenging negative stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive culture. This can lead to broader societal changes, such as greater inclusion in employment, education, and social life (ResearchGate, 2022). The political arena, in this sense, becomes a powerful platform for dismantling prejudice and building a more equitable society for all, proving that capability is not defined by able-bodiedness.

---

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations: A Collective Responsibility

The evidence presented in this report confirms that while women with disabilities face a unique and intersectional set of barriers to political participation, these challenges are not insurmountable. The task of creating inclusive and accessible political systems is a shared responsibility that requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society. Moving forward, the following recommendations provide a clear and actionable roadmap.

### 1. For Governments and Electoral Bodies:

- **Implement Legislative Quotas:** Introduce and enforce legislated quotas or reserved seats for persons with disabilities in national and sub-national legislatures to guarantee their representation.
- **Mandate Electoral Accessibility:** Mandate and fund comprehensive accessibility audits of all polling stations and electoral offices, ensuring physical accessibility and providing alternative voting methods like postal, proxy, or telephone voting.
- **Improve Data Collection:** Systematically collect and publish sex-disaggregated data on the political participation of persons with disabilities, including their representation in elected office, to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement.

- **Provide Financial Support:** Governments should establish a dedicated fund to assist disabled candidates with the additional costs of campaigning, such as accessible transport and personal assistance.

## 2. For Political Parties:

- **Adopt Voluntary Quotas:** Adopt and enforce voluntary quotas for women with disabilities in candidate selection, ensuring their placement in winnable seats.
- **Offer Targeted Support:** Create dedicated funds to support the campaigns of women with disabilities, covering both general and disability-related expenses.
- **Ensure Internal Accessibility:** Ensure that all party meetings, conventions, and documents are fully accessible and provide training for all party members on disability inclusion.

## 3. For Civil Society and International Organisations:

- **Invest in Capacity Building:** Fund and implement leadership and mentoring programmes that are designed for and led by women with disabilities, providing them with the practical skills needed to succeed in politics.
- **Lead Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:** Partner with media organisations to run public awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and highlight the political contributions of women with disabilities.
- **Facilitate Shared Learning:** Facilitate the sharing of best practices and case studies between countries and organisations to accelerate progress and avoid the duplication of effort.

## Conclusion

By taking these decisive steps, Commonwealth nations can transform their democratic institutions into truly representative and effective bodies. The inclusion of women with disabilities in political life is not a matter of charity; it is a fundamental requirement for building a more just, equitable, and democratic future for all.

## Alphabetical Reference List

Centenary Action. (2022). Overcoming the barriers to disabled women's involvement in politics.

<https://centenaryaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CAG-Overcoming-the-barriers-to-womens-involvement-in-politics.pdf>

Centenary Action. (2025). Breaking down barriers: Empowering disabled women in politics.

<https://centenaryaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Breaking-down-barriers-1.pdf>

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. (2023). *A blueprint for E-Parliaments. The Parliamentarian*, 2023 Issue Two, page 127.

[parl2023iss2finalonlinesinglereduced.pdf](#)

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). (n.d.). *Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD)*.

<https://www.cpahq.org/our-networks/commonwealth-parliamentarians-with-disabilities/>

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). (n.d.). *Disability Inclusive Communications Guidelines*.

[https://www.cpahq.org/media/zm2hwjqe/2024\\_disabilitycomms\\_final.pdf](https://www.cpahq.org/media/zm2hwjqe/2024_disabilitycomms_final.pdf)

Coventry University. (2023). Making voices heard: Exploring opportunities and challenges of technology use for people with disabilities to engage in politics.

[Making voices heard: Exploring opportunities and challenges of technology use for people with disabilities to engage in politics | Coventry University](#)

European Disability Forum. (2024). Political under-representation of women with disabilities must be tackled.

<https://www.edf-feph.org/political-under-representation-of-women-with-disabilities-must-be-tackled/>

GOV.UK. (2021). Barriers to Elected Office for Disabled People.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people>



International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). (2022). Disability Rights and Elections.

<https://www.ifes.org/search?topic=18>

Kahn, T. & McMenamin, E. (2023). Parliamentary Learning from Peer Networks: Best Practices from Global Experience. *The Parliamentarian*, 2023 Issue Two.

[parl2023iss2finalonlinesinglereduced.pdf](#)

ResearchGate. (2022). Disability Advocacy Group via Social Media.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360941371\\_Disability\\_Advocacy\\_Group\\_via\\_Social\\_Media](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360941371_Disability_Advocacy_Group_via_Social_Media)

Sightsavers. (2020). The participation of men and women with disabilities in political life in Cameroon: Baseline Report.

[https://research.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Cameroon-political-participation\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://research.sightsavers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Cameroon-political-participation_Final_Report.pdf)

UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. (2024). Article 29: Participation in Political and Public Life.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

University of Bath. (2024). Barriers to Women Entering Parliament and Local Government.

<https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/barriers-to-women-entering-parliament-and-local-government/attachments/barriers-to-women.pdf>

World Health Organization. (2023). Disability and Health.

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health>