



Enabling participation: supporting the involvement of disabled people in political parties

ILMI POSITION PAPER

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ENABLING PARTICIPATION:

Supporting the involvement of disabled people in Political Parties

Article 29 (a) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) calls on State parties to ensure that disabled people have “political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others” including the right to vote and be elected.

Ireland’s first report to the UNCRPD under article 29 lists no actions to support greater involvement of disabled people in politics. ILMI brought together disabled activists, including those who have run for office and are elected in politics to discuss the barriers to participation that exist for disabled people in Irish politics, and measures that need to be brought into place to address this exclusion.

CONTEXT

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) estimates that 13.5% of the population are disabled people yet there have been very few disabled people elected to politics in Ireland. The absence of disabled people as politicians reinforces the lack of visibility of disabled people and deters aspiring disabled candidates. The absence of disabled politicians means the issues facing disabled people are often inadequately addressed in politics.



Issues identified that prevent the participation of disabled people in politics in Ireland

ACCESS TO POLITICAL MEETINGS:

Disabled people need to be supported to fully participate in their local political parties to seek nominations to run for office. There is a shortage of fully accessible private spaces for political parties to organise in. More often than not, political meetings are held in pubs. These are often completely inaccessible to disabled people in terms of stairs, lack of accessible bathrooms and include issues relating to noise for disabled people with sensory issues. Meetings in pubs will also have an impact for other groups based on exclusionary practices (Travellers, Transgender people and people who do not drink alcohol for other reasons, including health and religion). Many public spaces are fully accessible (libraries or public offices) but cannot be used by political parties.

INACCESSIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE

Disabled candidates need to be able to interact directly with the electorate to canvass and build up their reputation. The terrain, lack of accessible spaces and accessible transport can limit disabled candidates and politicians from building up their profile. This is exacerbated by lack of accessible transport options in rural areas. A large part of politics is being able to build a rapport with voters which requires access to local events.



COST OF DISABILITY

Disabled people have additional costs in relation to their impairment, and due to societal barriers, fewer disabled people are employed. Elections are expensive and these additional costs present an additional barrier to encouraging disabled people to run for office.

LACK OF APPROPRIATE SUPPORTS

Disabled people often need specific supports to live independent lives and this includes disabled people who wish to run for office. Disabled candidates may need additional supports, such as extra Personal Assistance Service (PAS) hours to perform specific tasks for them; for example, driving a car or providing guidance from door to door, handing out leaflets and so on. A Deaf candidate would require Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreters for meetings at party level, canvassing door to door or attending local meetings. There have been instances where disabled people have been told by service providers that they could not have their PA attend political meetings due to restrictions placed by the HSE funding through section 39 organisations.



What needs to happen to make politics inclusive for Disabled People:



AT A STATUTORY LEVEL

As per Article 29 of the UNCRPD, the State needs to take proactive steps to embed inclusion in the political system to ensure the participation of disabled people as candidates by the following:

ESTABLISH AND RESOURCE AND ELECTION FUND FOR DISABLED CANDIDATES.

A specific fund needs to be established to 'level the playing field' for disabled people to fight political campaigns where they face additional costs due to impairment related barriers that non-disabled people do not need to consider. This has proven to work in other jurisdictions to encourage the participation of disabled people in elections.

CLARIFICATION ON PAS AND POLITICS

There needs to be clarification that disabled people can use their PAS to support their involvement in politics: branch meetings, canvassing, networking or attending political meetings. The Personal Assistance Service is about ensuring disabled people have autonomy and agency in their lives, which should include the choice to participate in politics.

TAOISEACH NOMINATION

The Taoiseach nomination process to the Seanad should include a disabled activist with direct links to the community through Disabled Persons Organisations. The nomination of Eileen Flynn had a hugely symbolic effect by electing the first Traveller woman to the Seanad. A similar measure to elect a disabled activist would similarly create a voice for disabled people at the highest office and a give voice to disability politics that has been lacking nationally.

AT A POLITICAL PARTY LEVEL

As per section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act (2014), any organisation in receipt of public funds have responsibility to promote equality, prevent discrimination and protect the human rights of their employees, customers, service users and everyone affected by their policies and plans. This is a legal obligation, called the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty. All political parties must in their Public Sector Duty address the following:



- Work with Disabled Persons Organisations (DPOs) to disability equality proof their policies and procedures to address any structural barriers to the participation of disabled people in their parties.
- Ensure that all party headquarters are made fully accessible to disabled people to ensure their active participation as party members, staff and candidates.
- Develop guidelines for inclusion of disabled people at branch level, including ensuring that venues chosen for party meetings are fully accessible and inclusive.
- Parties should set up specific working groups for disabled people and develop structural supports that groups of disabled members of parties can then feed their views into national executives.
- Political parties should offer the option of “blended / hybrid” meetings to encourage disabled people to participate, but they should also ensure that disabled people are supported to attend accessible face to face meetings to avail of informal networking within their party structures.



Independent Living Movement Ireland

**Carmichael House,
North Brunswick Street,
Dublin 7, D07 RHA8**

**+353 (0)1 873 0455
info@ilmi.ie**

www.ilmi.ie



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