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WBU External Resource Paper

Blind People and Accessible Voting

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This policy paper is intended to provide information about the barriers and challenges faced by blind and partially sighted persons while exercising their right to a secret and independent vote; some methods that are currently in use; and some suggestions that can help to facilitate the voting process. Because technology and voting methods change rapidly and we cannot possibly know of each method, the WBU encourages its members and others to inform us of voting methods you become aware of and that you find particularly accessible and helpful so that we might continue to update this resource paper.

Introduction

The right to vote is one of the basic and fundamental political human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other specific thematic UN conventions. Article 29 "Participation in political and public life" of the UNCRPD clearly mandates states parties to ensure the right to vote of all persons with disabilities including blind and partially sighted persons. (Refer to annexure -1 for the detailed article).

The secret ballot is a basic political right in a free society. It is a precondition of democracy and its denial compromises personal

freedom and, in some parts of the world, places the individual at risk from intimidation and physical violence. In industrial democracies blind people mostly take the secret ballot for granted, whereas in developing or non-democratic countries, it is often an emotive and problematic issue. The specific issues faced by blind and partially sighted persons in exercising their right to vote are summarized below: Source: "Blind and voting methods" (WBU external resource paper) August 2002.

The right to full citizenship of Blind/Partially sighted persons is one of the major concerns in the world. Full citizenship rights include, inter alia, the right to vote, right to get elected, right to participate in decision making processes in all statutory bodies. The right to full citizenship is included in the list of civil and political rights articulated in the UNCRPD which should be immediately realised, since there is no resource implication in the general conditions. This condition is a bit more complex with regard to blind/partially sighted persons.

Accessibility, inclusive and universal design are pre-requisites which enable Blind/Partially sighted persons to enjoy their full citizenship rights on an equal basis with others, and are definitely required to enable them to exercise their right to vote on an independent basis.. This pre-requisite demands resources but unfortunately in developing countries it is not a priority area to invest resources. Such discriminatory attitudes of the state thus results in the deprivation of the full citizenship rights of blind/partially sighted persons since they are deprived of the right to an accessible and independent vote. .

Some of the key challenges, issues and barriers faced by blind and partially sighted persons in trying to exercise their right to vote with dignity are discussed below:

Challenges and barriers related to the right to vote for blind/partially sighted persons:

- Blind and partially sighted persons are often not viewed as individuals with full citizenship rights including having the right to vote and to be elected, by their families, communities and the political parties.
- Thus often they are just ignored in the elections and voting process in their communities or countries.

- Often they are viewed as objects of charity and pity where family members or agents of political parties who assist them in exercising right to vote, just drag them like an animal and cast their vote without their knowledge or informed consent and their choice of assistant.
- They may be ridiculed and humiliated by the polling station staff.
- Blind and partially sighted Women are often discouraged by family members to cast their vote since they need assistance which is often provided by male staff of polling stations.
- In many developing countries, the ballot papers are not made accessible in braille and large print.
- For those countries that use electronic voting machines (EVMs) they are often not equipped with Braille markings or auditory instructions.
- Often the ballot box is kept in a dark room without adequate light which causes disproportionate hardship to partially sighted persons in casting their vote which may result in a spoiled or incorrectly marked ballot being submitted.
- Election campaign processes and campaigning materials are not usually available in accessible formats which reduce the ability of blind and partially sighted persons to make informed choices.
- Election campaign platforms rarely address the issues facing persons with disabilities including those who are blind or partially sighted. Source: "Right to vote and to be get elected" (An article to Human rights publication series) International Disability Alliance (IDA), June 2013.

Voting Methods

A variety of voting methods are used by governments to accommodate blind and partially sighted persons at the polls. The method chosen depends on many factors, including the integrity of the process, the commitment of electoral authorities, consultations with blind and partially sighted people, available technology, and cost. The choice is more difficult where the ballot paper contains a long list of candidates or parties, where second choices have to be indicated, or when a single ballot paper includes voting choices for multiple positions that are being elected simultaneously. In such instances, the possibility of error is increased and rendering the ballot papers accessible becomes much more complex. Even when an effective method is in use, blind people frequently experience problems with officials who are

untrained, uninformed, or behave inappropriately. Whatever method is used, it can be made more effective by voter education. The needs of partially sighted voters also have to be taken into account when designing the ballot paper. Font size, typeface, colour contrast, clarity of symbols and logos as well as available illumination are critical factors. Source: "Blind and voting methods" (WBU external resource paper) August 2002.

The list of methods given below is not exhaustive and each method is open to variation and may be used in combination with another method. We would welcome receiving information on further methods to make the list more complete.

- Voting by raising the hand in public – unacceptable because it violates privacy.
- Braille ballot – advocated by some, but open to abuse, as only a few blind people may vote at any one polling station, enabling electoral officials to determine the voter's choice.
- Template – a template that the ballot is inserted into with holes or slots that align with the proper position on the voting ballot; these are increasingly advocated and can work well, but questions of alignment and the matching of slots with choices can arise. Templates with Braille or other tactile markings – would enable some blind people to vote completely and independently, but could be inaccessible to some.
- Voting by direct recording electronic devices (DREs) – these are computerised machines that use touch-sensitive screens. Although DRE touch-sensitive screens are of little use by themselves to the visually impaired, several voting technology companies now produce plug-in components for the machines that "talk" through voice recordings and have keys with raised arrows and icons that blind voters can read with their fingertips. These adapted electronic voting machines can work very well.
- For any of these methods to work effectively, voter education and training as well as training of polling station staff are very important. Source: "Blind and voting methods" (WBU external resource paper) August 2002.

Suggestions

Based on the challenges and barriers and voting methods in use as discussed above, we propose the following suggestions to enable blind and partially sighted persons to exercise their right to vote independently and in secrecy:

- That local organizations of the blind be consulted in the design and implementation of accessible voting systems.
- That accessible and inclusive voting methods be put in place for all elections and that these are available at all polling stations.
- Advocate that blind and partially sighted voters may be assisted to vote by someone of their choosing to assist them in marking the ballot papers in the event that the voting methods available are inaccessible to them.
- Advocate for the sensitisation and training of polling officials in order that they understand the needs and issues of blind and partially sighted voters.
- Advocate for inclusive election campaigns with fully accessible materials in order to understand the voting procedures and to make informed choices in the voting process.

Annexure-1:

ARTICLE 29 - PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE

States Parties shall guarantee to Persons With Disabilities their political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others, and shall undertake to:

(a) Ensure that Persons With Disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for Persons With Disabilities to vote and be elected, inter alia, by:

- (i) Ensuring that voting procedures, facilities and materials are appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use;
- (ii) Protecting the right of Persons With Disabilities to vote by secret ballot in elections and public referendums, without intimidation, and to stand for elections and to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate;
- (iii) Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of Persons With Disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their

request, allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice.

(b) Promote actively 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 encourage their participation in public affairs, including:

(i) Participation in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country, and in the activities and administration of political parties;

(ii) Forming and joining organizations of Persons with Disabilities to represent Persons With Disabilities at international, national, regional and local levels.