

Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Jordan: A Qualitative Interview-Based Study

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Abstract

Political participation is a fundamental right and a key indicator of democratic inclusion. However, persons with disabilities (PWDs) remain significantly underrepresented in political life worldwide, particularly in the Middle East. This qualitative study explores the barriers to political participation among PWDs in Jordan through in-depth interviews with nine participants representing three types of disability: physical, visual, and hearing. The participants, aged 18 and above, were selected to reflect diversity in gender, educational background, and marital status. Thematic analysis revealed four core barriers: physical and infrastructural inaccessibility, communication and information barriers, legal and institutional inadequacies, and societal and attitudinal challenges. These findings align with global and regional literature, demonstrating that despite legislative frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Jordan's Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities No. 20 (2017), implementation gaps persist. This paper recommends inclusive policy enforcement, public awareness campaigns, accessible electoral systems, and disability-specific training for election officials.

Keywords: Political Participation, Persons With Disabilities, Jordan, Inclusion, CRPD, Barriers

Introduction

Political participation is one of the rights of democratic governance and human rights. The right is guaranteed across the world in many international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and, more specifically, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) which points out the responsibility of states also to ensure that persons with disabilities (PWDs) enjoy the same political rights as others. According to the CRPD article 29, state parties are required to ensure that PWDs are able to participate in political and broader public life on an equal basis with others, particularly through freely chosen representatives, both in terms of political rights (including the right to vote and be elected) and equal access to public service.

Even though there exist these legal assurances, there still exists a huge gap between the policy and actual practice. Surveys carried out across different global regions, including the United States and the European Union and sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, point to a set of persistent risks, namely inaccessibility of polling stations, the inaccessibility of election information, low levels of political awareness, and stigma (Schur et al., 2017; Lord and Stein, 2008; Sakellariou et al., 2020). Even more so, these barriers are characteristic of the Global South, whose institutional support and infrastructure are frequently poor.

The Middle East is a place where the political inclusion of PWDs remains a rather unexplored issue. Equality of political rights of persons with disabilities is assured in Jordan in national legislation and so is Law No. 20 on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017). The law is consistent with the fact that Jordan ratified the CRPD in 2008 and is a part of its general social inclusion and human rights policy. However, according to the empirical studies, there are few practical steps that the rights performed. According to a 2021 report by the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, most polling centers are inaccessible and election facilities are seldom adjusted to the needs of persons with sensory disabilities.

Within this background, the current research attempts to respond to the existing gap in the research about PWDs particularly in Jordan since it will be done qualitatively by investigating the experiences of PWDs in understanding the political landscapes of the country. Thus, the major purpose of the study is to address the obstacles the PWDs experience and clarify recommended measures that can facilitate inclusive political participation. This study is significant because its findings can be used in policy making and it is likely to lead to a participatory democratic system in Jordan.

Literature Review

Political participation is widely recognized as a fundamental right for persons with disabilities. In many countries, electoral processes have historically not been designed with disability access in mind, resulting in complex procedures or technologies that are difficult to navigate for those with disabilities (Alvarez and Hall, 2010; Syed et al., 2022). Even welfare and legal structures can pose hurdles; for example, policies that institutionalize people with disabilities or disenfranchise those deemed “mentally incompetent” have long curtailed political rights (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, 2016). Thus, beyond physical inaccessibility, broader structural discrimination – whether in law or policy implementation – has contributed to the political sidelining of persons with disabilities around the world. Attitudinal and structural barriers often reinforce one another, creating an environment where people with disabilities are not expected or encouraged to take part in politics, which in turn perpetuates their underrepresentation. As Schur et al. (2017) observe, many disabled citizens remain politically isolated, in part because political parties and candidates often neglect to reach out to them, and societal messages may signal that their participation is not valued.

It is important to recognize that “persons with disabilities” are not a monolithic group, and political participation can vary widely by disability type and other intersecting factors. Research in the United States and Europe has found that people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities often have especially low rates of voting and political involvement compared to those with physical or sensory impairments (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Waltz & Schippers, 2020). Cognitive impairments can make certain electoral procedures or political information

difficult to understand, leading to lower confidence in voting without support (Ghazawy et al., 2020; Shulman et al., 2022). Many jurisdictions historically imposed formal voting restrictions on people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, labelling them "incompetent" to vote – a practice now condemned by the CRPD but whose legacy continues to depress participation (James et al., 2021; Syafi'ie et al., 2022). Even when legal barriers are removed, insufficient provision of plain-language materials or assisted voting mechanisms means that individuals with intellectual disabilities may still effectively be disenfranchised. By contrast, people with primarily physical disabilities (mobility, vision, hearing impairments) may face different challenges – such as transport to polling places or needing ballot papers in Braille or large print – but with the right accommodations, their turnout can approach population averages (Schur et al., 2017; Lord & Stein, 2008). Studies also point to gender and age dimensions of disability and political engagement, though findings are mixed. Women with disabilities, for example, often encounter compounded barriers due to gender bias and domestic roles (The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW, 2018). However, a deep discussion of such intersectional issues is beyond the scope of this review. Overall, the heterogeneity among persons with disabilities means that tailored strategies are required to address the specific needs of different groups to ensure equal political participation.

Notably, much of the existing literature on disability and political participation has centered on Western democracies and has relied on quantitative surveys of voting behaviour. Numerous studies from the United States, Europe, and Australia have enriched our understanding of turnout gaps and related challenges, but their contexts – characterised by established democratic institutions and comparatively robust disability rights enforcement – differ from those in developing countries. Scholars have called for more research in varied cultural and political settings, using qualitative approaches to capture the lived experiences behind the numbers (Mohr et al., 2023; Najafi et al., 2021).

In their review of global research, Hästbacka et al. (2016) observed that most studies focused narrowly on voting statistics during 2012–2013 and left many questions about broader political engagement unanswered. Likewise, McGrath et al. (2019) highlight a dearth of in-depth, qualitative inquiries into how people with disabilities perceive politics and what barriers they face in everyday civic life. This gap is especially pronounced for the Global South. As Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) argue, disability research and advocacy have often been dominated by Northern (Western) perspectives, which do not fully capture the realities in the Global South. In lower-income countries, persons with disabilities frequently contend with additional challenges such as extreme poverty, conflict and instability, or the absence of basic accessibility infrastructure (Grech, 2016; Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2013). These conditions can exacerbate exclusion and limit political participation in ways not seen in wealthier nations. Therefore, understanding barriers to political participation in diverse national contexts is crucial for developing inclusive democracies. This recognition has prompted a growing, though still limited, body of work examining disability and politics in non-Western settings.

Within the Middle East and Arab region, the issue of political participation among persons with disabilities has started to gain attention, but research remains relatively sparse. Many Arab countries have ratified the CRPD and introduced laws to enhance the rights of persons with disabilities, yet implementation on the ground often lags behind legislative commitments (Morgan, 2023; Sargent, 2021). Broadly, evidence suggests that people with

disabilities in the region face similar obstacles to those documented elsewhere – physical inaccessibility, societal stigma, lack of accessible information – compounded by local socio-political factors. Cultural attitudes in some Arab societies, which may view disability through a charity or pity lens rather than a rights-based lens, can disempower people with disabilities from participating in public affairs. Until recently, disability issues in the region were largely addressed by charitable organizations, and there were few avenues for persons with disabilities to engage in formal politics or advocacy (Hadidi & Al-Khateeb, 2015).

In conflict-affected states or those with political instability, such as Iraq or Syria, these challenges are magnified. A Human Rights Watch report on Iraq documented that in the 2021 parliamentary elections, many Iraqis with disabilities were effectively prevented from voting due to a combination of discriminatory legislation and inadequate accommodations, including a lack of accessible polling places and ballots. Such findings underscore that legal and logistical barriers remain widespread: for example, some Iraqi laws still allowed authorities to strip voting rights on the basis of perceived mental incapacity, and election officials often failed to provide ramps, sign language interpreters, or voter education-targeted at disabled communities.

Reports from other Arab countries echo these concerns. In Tunisia, disability advocates noted improvements in recent elections (such as ballots with candidate photos and sign-language interpreted campaign materials), but also persistent gaps like inaccessible campaign venues and limited participation of women with disabilities (International Foundation for Electoral System (IFES), 2024). Overall, while disability inclusion in politics is increasingly on the agenda in the Arab region – often spurred by the influence of international norms and local civil society activism – significant progress is still needed to overcome entrenched barriers. The literature calls for more context-specific studies in Arab societies to shed light on the experiences of voters and potential leaders with disabilities, as well as the effectiveness of emerging initiatives to support their political involvement.

Jordan provides a particularly insightful national context, being often described as a regional leader in disability rights on paper, yet still grappling with low political participation among persons with disabilities. Influenced in part by international norms and partnerships, Jordan has made substantial legal strides towards inclusion. It ratified the CRPD in 2008 and has since enacted progressive national legislation, notably the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (No. 20 of 2017) (UN, 2019). This law explicitly guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to participate in all political activities on an equal basis with others. Article 44(a) of the 2017 Act states that no individual shall be denied the right to vote or run for office due to disability, mandating that elections be made accessible and inclusive (Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2025a). In theory, therefore, Jordan has a strong legal framework designed to eliminate discrimination in political life. In practice, however, the political engagement of Jordanian citizens with disabilities remains minimal. Despite comprising a notable segment of the population – an estimated 11% of Jordanian families include at least one person with a disability (Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2025b) – people with disabilities are rarely seen in electoral processes, public consultations, or decision-making positions.

Voter turnout among Jordanians with disabilities is believed to be very low (although precise statistics are not systematically collected), and few individuals with disabilities have run for or been appointed to political office. This disconnect between policy and reality suggests that legislative changes have not yet translated into full inclusion on the ground. Researchers and advocates point to a range of persistent barriers within Jordan that continue to hinder persons with disabilities from engaging in politics. Physical accessibility remains a core issue: many polling stations, government buildings, and meeting venues in Jordan lack adequate ramps, elevators, or signposted accommodations, making it difficult for people with mobility impairments to physically access voting and political events (JNCW, 2018).

Public transportation is often inaccessible or unreliable, further limiting the mobility of voters with disabilities on election days (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2010). Moreover, a shortage of assistive services, such as sign language interpreters at political rallies or braille election materials, means that individuals with sensory disabilities can struggle to obtain information about candidates and voting procedures. For example, in the 2016 national elections, ballots in braille were not available, and many deaf voters reported a lack of sign-interpreted outreach, hampering their independent participation. These infrastructural and communication barriers are compounded by socio-cultural factors. Many Jordanians with disabilities have historically been marginalized in educational and economic life, which tends to carry over into political marginalization.

In particular, participants reported feeling that politics "does not concern people like us," reflecting a lack of confidence and a sense of exclusion. This lack of interest was often linked not to apathy per se, but to practical discouragement – for example, inaccessible campus facilities made attending student council meetings difficult, and the absence of sign language interpreters meant deaf students could not follow debates, leading many to disengage (Alelaimat, 2019).

The study also pointed to legislative and administrative factors: while Jordan has supportive laws, awareness of these rights was low, and students felt that university and election authorities did not do enough to accommodate their needs. Such findings underscore that simply having rights "on the books" is insufficient without active measures to implement them and raise awareness. Indeed, observers of Jordan's national elections have noted similar patterns. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) in recent years introduced measures like priority voting queues and allowed personal assistants for voters with disabilities, improving the experience for some. However, independent monitors reported ongoing shortcomings – for example, many polling centers still lacked basic physical accessibility, and there were insufficient awareness campaigns to inform voters with disabilities of how to exercise their rights. As a result, a considerable number of eligible voters with disabilities either did not know they could vote or were unsure of the procedures, contributing to low turnout. This illustrates the gap between policy intentions and effective inclusion.

In summary, the literature indicates that while Jordan has made commendable legal and institutional progress toward disability inclusion in politics, multiple barriers continue to limit the political participation of persons with disabilities. Globally and in Jordan, these barriers range from negative attitudes and social isolation to concrete accessibility failures and information gaps. The global evidence base, largely drawn from Western contexts,

provides insight into common challenges and enabling factors, but also highlights the need for context-specific understanding. Regionally, Jordan's experience resonates with those of other Arab countries where the implementation of disability rights is still nascent. Crucially, there is a paucity of research amplifying the voices of Jordanians with disabilities themselves regarding their political experiences (Rahahleh et al., 2021). The present study seeks to fill this gap by exploring, through qualitative interviews, the lived realities and perceptions of political participation among persons with disabilities in Jordan. Building on the global and regional insights outlined above, this research will examine how international and national promises of inclusion are playing out on the ground, and what obstacles remain to be overcome to ensure that persons with disabilities in Jordan can participate fully in political life.

Methodology

Research Design

This research study used qualitative, interview-researched based design that aimed at discovering the obstacles facing the political participation of persons with disabilities in Jordan. The exploratory method was selected because little work had been done on this issue in the local context before, meaning that the participants had a chance to share their personal experiences and perceptions in detail. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they enable a flexible yet focused exploration of sensitive and complex issues. This design allowed the researchers to probe for clarification and detail, yielding rich, narrative data on the social, structural, and attitudinal barriers that might hinder political engagement for people with disabilities.

Participants

Nine individuals (five men and four women) participated in the study. All were Jordanian adults (aged 22–60) with a self-identified physical, visual, or hearing disability. Purposive sampling was used to ensure a diverse range of participants in terms of disability type, gender, age, and background, so as to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. No specific prior political involvement was required; both those who had participated in political activities and those who had not were included, to understand barriers regardless of personal experience in politics. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (nickname) for anonymity. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' key characteristics, including their nicknames, ages, genders, types of disability, educational background, and marital status.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Disability Type	Education	Marital Status
Hassan	45	Male	Physical disability	High School	Married
Ammar	25	Male	Visual impairment	Bachelor's Degree	Single
Lina	30	Female	Physical disability	Master's Degree	Married
Yousef	34	Male	Visual impairment	Master's Degree	Married
Sara	22	Female	Visual impairment	Bachelor's Degree	Single
Fatima	40	Female	Physical disability	Vocational Diploma	Married
Omar	29	Male	Hearing impairment	Diploma	Single

Mahmoud	60	Male	Hearing impairment	Primary Education	Widowed
Rana	36	Female	Hearing impairment	Bachelor's Degree	Divorced

Participants' educational attainment ranged from primary schooling to postgraduate degrees, and their marital statuses included single, married, divorced, and widowed. This heterogeneity in demographics was intentional, aiming to reflect varied life situations that might influence political participation. While the sample size was relatively small, it was appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study. Interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached – by the ninth interview, no substantively new information was emerging, indicating that the sample was sufficient for capturing the key themes relevant to the research questions.

Procedure

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through community outreach and collaboration with local disability organisations. The research team circulated a study invitation via disability support groups, social media platforms, and community centres frequented by persons with disabilities. Interested individuals contacted the researchers and were then screened against the inclusion criteria (aged 18 or above, living with a physical, visual, or hearing disability, and willing to discuss their experiences with political participation). This purposive recruitment strategy ensured that the sample included individuals who could provide insight into the research topic. Once a pool of potential participants was identified, each person was contacted to schedule an interview at a convenient time and place.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to each interview, participants gave informed consent after receiving an information sheet (provided in accessible formats such as large print or via oral explanation) outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights (including voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time). Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained: no real names or identifying details were included in any transcripts or reports, and participants were referred to only by their pseudonyms. All data (audio recordings and transcripts) were stored securely, with access limited to the research team.

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted in a setting chosen for each participant's comfort and accessibility. Most interviews took place face-to-face in a quiet, private location, such as an accessible meeting room at a community centre or the participant's home. For a few participants, interviews were conducted via video call due to personal preference or logistical needs.

Appropriate accommodations were made to ensure effective communication. For example, a sign language interpreter was present during interviews with participants who communicated using sign language. Additionally, all written materials (such as consent forms and interview guides) were provided in accessible formats (e.g. Braille or large print) for participants with visual impairments.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure an accurate record of the conversation. All interviews were conducted in Arabic (the participants' native language) to allow them to express themselves comfortably, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The Arabic transcripts were then translated into English for the purposes of analysis and reporting.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions covering key topics related to the study. The guide included questions about participants' experiences (or lack thereof) in political activities (such as voting, attending community meetings, or engaging with public officials), their perceived barriers to political engagement, and any suggestions they had for improving the political inclusion of persons with disabilities. This flexible format allowed the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and seek clarification while ensuring that all core topics were discussed with each participant.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, following an inductive, data-driven process. After each interview, the audio recording was transcribed verbatim (and translated into English as needed), resulting in a set of detailed transcripts for analysis. The transcripts were imported into NVivo 12 (QSR International) software to aid in organising the data and managing codes. The analysis was primarily inductive, meaning that codes and themes were derived from the data rather than from pre-existing hypotheses. The research team had a systematic way of doing their work to guarantee a stringent analysis:

Familiarisation: The researchers became familiar with the data which entailed re-reading all the transcripts several times over. This engagement with the raw data enabled the team to have a generalized understanding of the content and to record preliminary impressions or common ideas referring to the barriers to political participation.

Coding: The team then conducted a line-by-line coding on each transcript. They underlined and identically marked off the portions of the textual material that referred to different ideas or issues (e.g., certain barriers, such as the inaccessibility of polling stations, negative views of the society, or information unavailability in accessible formats). Preliminary codes were maintained as close to the actual words of the participants as possible to abide by the intended meaning.

Seeking themes: The collection of codes was then viewed in search of patterns in order to have potential similarities organized into tentative themes. Some codes that were similar or those that touched a common element of the research question were grouped. For instance, individual codes related to physical accessibility issues (such as transportation difficulties and venue inaccessibility) were organised under a preliminary theme of "Accessibility Barriers". Through this process, a set of candidate themes began to take shape, each representing a broader barrier or influencing factor in political participation.

Reviewing and refining themes: The research team reviewed the candidate themes against the original transcripts to verify that each theme was grounded in the data. During this stage, some themes were refined, merged, or split. For example, what initially appeared as one theme might be divided into two distinct themes upon closer examination, or two overlapping themes might be consolidated into one. The themes were adjusted until each represented a coherent pattern in the data and there was a clear

distinction between different themes. Team discussions were held to resolve any discrepancies in interpretation and to ensure that the themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

Defining and naming themes: Once the final set of themes was agreed upon, the researchers defined and named each theme. This involved articulating the essence of each theme in a concise description and selecting vivid, representative quotations from the interviews to illustrate the theme. Clear definitions ensured that the scope of each theme was well understood, and any subthemes within a broader theme were identified and delineated.

Ensuring rigour: Throughout the analysis, measures were taken to enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings. Two members of the research team independently coded portions of the transcripts and then compared their coding to check for consistency. Differences in coding were discussed and resolved, leading to a refined coding framework that was applied across all transcripts. This peer-review process helped mitigate individual researcher bias and ensured that the findings were not unduly influenced by a single analyst's perspective. An audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained to provide transparency. Together, these steps contributed to the trustworthiness of the analysis.

By following these steps, the study ensured that the data analysis was systematic and thorough. The thematic analysis enabled the identification of key patterns and recurrent issues, which are presented in the subsequent sections as the main findings on barriers to political participation for persons with disabilities in Jordan.

Findings and Discussion

Legal and Institutional Barriers

Participants described several systemic barriers rooted in laws, policies, and institutional practices. Despite Jordan's formal commitments – including ratification of the CRPD, which guarantees the right of persons with disabilities to vote and be elected – many felt that “rights on paper” did not translate into reality. For instance, one interviewee with a visual disability (Sara) recounted how election officials were unprepared to accommodate her needs: *“I went to register to vote, but there were no Braille forms or anyone who could guide me. They said the law supports my voting, yet no one at the office knew what to do with me”*. This quote illustrates the gap between legal provisions and implementation. Indeed, research in Jordan confirms that while progressive laws exist (e.g. the 2017 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), weak enforcement and vague mandates often limit their impact. A case in point is the continued exclusion of certain voters on the basis of disability status. Until recently, persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities in Jordan could be denied their right to vote under antiquated legal definitions of “insanity,” a practice criticized as discriminatory. Such legal barriers not only directly disenfranchise some individuals, but also send a message that people with disabilities are unequal citizens in the political realm.

Institutional shortcomings compound these issues. Participants highlighted a lack of disability inclusiveness within political institutions and processes. One Deaf participant noted (Omar) *“There are supposed to be sign-language interpreters and accessible materials by law, but I have never seen them provided in my town”*, pointing to the failure of authorities to operationalize required accommodations. This experience is consistent with reports that election bodies sometimes lack data, training, and plans to effectively include disabled voters.

For example, in past elections the authorities did not reliably inform voters with disabilities about which polling stations were accessible – in some cases, officials registered people at inaccessible stations due to poor information management. Moreover, political parties and leaders have historically offered minimal support to aspiring politicians with disabilities. According to Waltz and Schippers (2020), disability candidates lack the material and moral support and have limited support of the political leaders or parties, which is one of the reasons why persons with disabilities rarely feature in formal politics. This has meant that disabled people have been mostly left out of the political life in Jordan over the decades thus resulting in a lack of representation and experience in governance. This marginalization in the past was reflected in the interviews where many participants believed that regardless of what the law states, the political system has not taken any initiative to integrate them. This fact is consistent with the existing literature that includes legal inclusion in institutional change; a process to bring down barriers established over time, which involves training of officials, enforcing accessibility standards and active inclusion of the person with disability (Schur et al., 2017; Morgan, 2023).

Infrastructure and Physical Accessibility

Almost everyone referred to the physical environment as a significant obstacle to their political participation. Inaccessible infrastructure—from public buildings to transportation—was repeatedly mentioned as limiting their ability to vote, attend meetings, or campaign. One participant using a wheelchair (Hassan) said, "*Arriving at a polling center only to find two flights of stairs and no ramp. I had to wait outside until someone fetched my ballot – it was humiliating.*" Such experiences were common. Polling stations in Jordan are often located in older buildings (e.g. school buildings) that were built before modern accessibility codes and thus lack ramps, elevators, or adapted facilities. Research by Rahahleh et al. (2021) notes that many participants in their study "found the physical environments relating to [political] activities very difficult to navigate," with buildings not constructed to accommodate wheelchairs or other mobility needs. Even political party offices and local government halls were described as inaccessible, effectively deterring persons with disabilities from full involvement in these spaces.

Transportation emerged as a related structural hurdle. Several interviewees explained that the lack of accessible public transport or adaptive vehicles made it hard to reach political events and polling sites. For example, a woman with a physical disability (Lina) shared that "*on Election Day, I couldn't board the public bus to get to the polling station – none of the buses here have ramps or lifts.*" Others had to rely on costly taxis or family assistance to travel to voting centers. These accounts echo observations by election observers in Jordan: the absence of accessible transit has prevented many would-be voters with disabilities from obtaining voter cards or casting ballots. In 2013, monitors noted that inadequate transportation was one of the key factors limiting the turnout of voters with mobility impairments. Inaccessibility of the physical environment – both the venues and the means of getting there – thus continues to be a critical barrier. This is not only a local issue but also a global one; studies from various countries similarly report that when polling places are inaccessible, citizens with disabilities are effectively disenfranchised despite having the legal right to vote (Schur et al., 2017; Shulman et al.; 2022; Syed et al., 2022). The inaccessibility of public buildings and transport in Jordan severely limits persons with disabilities' engagement in all aspects of social, economic, and political life (Alkhatib, 2022; Rahahleh et al., 2021). Our

findings reinforce that without accessible infrastructure, formal political rights cannot be fully exercised.

Communication and Information Barriers

Communication and information access barriers are also prominently featured in participants' stories, especially for those with visual or hearing disabilities. Many felt they were kept "in the dark" about political developments, campaign messages, or procedures due to a lack of accessible communication. One Deaf participant (Mahmoud) recounted attending a local candidate's political rally: *"I stood there and everyone was clapping and reacting, but I had no idea what was being said. The interpreter of sign language was absent. At a certain point, I quit since I sensed I was not in the right place.* In the same fashion, a visually impaired participant (Yousef) indicated that most of the election-related documents were inaccessible: *"Most of the leaflets and brochures were normal print. I was not able to read any of it without assistance, so I wouldn't bother to even go and pick them up".* These stories show that, regardless of the intentions, the inability to make information available in appropriate forms may make people with impairments invisible in political rhetoric. Most people could not track political events, or get information about running and policy candidates without sign language interpretation, captioning, Braille, large print, or audio options.

These language barriers have been observed to take place all over the globe. Research in the United States, Europe, and Africa agrees that information and media inaccessibility restrain the political voice of individuals with disability in such societies. Schur et al. (2017) and Opoku et al. (2016), for example, report that voters with hearing or visual impairments often miss out on key political information when accommodations are not provided. Our findings align with this global pattern. Encouragingly, researchers have emphasised that improving communication accessibility can significantly boost political inclusion. Hommes et al. (2018) argue that providing appropriate communication facilities, such as sign language interpreters at events and accessible technologies, is central to enabling the political participation of persons with disabilities. For individuals with hearing impairments, in particular, having sign interpretation available "can be instrumental" in facilitating their engagement in political processes. Likewise, assistive technologies (screen readers, hearing devices, etc.) and plain-language content can help overcome informational challenges for various disability groups (Thill et al., 2014). These expert recommendations resonate strongly with what our participants expressed as needs.

In the Jordanian context, some steps have been taken in recent years to improve the accessibility of information, yet significant gaps remain. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) introduced sign-language translated TV ads and an accessible website ahead of the 2013 elections. However, independent observers noted that these efforts were insufficient, as large portions of the disabled community still lacked awareness of electoral procedures and rights. Many participants in our study admitted they did not receive or understand crucial information about voting. A focus group in 2015 found that most participants with disabilities had never voted, with some not even aware they were entitled to vote or how to obtain a voter ID. This mirrors our interviewees' experiences of information neglect. Deaf participants, in particular, face acute information gaps – monitors in one election reported that many voters with hearing impairment did not understand the voting process (e.g. how many votes they could cast, or the difference between electoral lists). At

polling stations, most had no access to sign communication, as sign language interpreters were available in only 36 stations nationwide (covering just 9 of 12 governorates). Consequently, some arrived without an escort and struggled to communicate with the staff. These findings underscore that insufficient accessible information and communication support remain formidable barriers. When political communication is not inclusive, people with disabilities are effectively sidelined from participating in public affairs, regardless of their interests or legal rights.

Societal Attitudes and Stigma

At last, the underlying social attitude and stigma turned out to be a common barrier integrated into every other problem. The participants reported low expectations, stereotypes, and even discouragement (directly) by the people around them when they tried to get into politics. A physically disabled young woman (Fatima) cried and expressed that *"I should not waste my time by voting, even by my own family. They claimed that politics was a preserve of ordinary citizens. This was painful in that it made me feel that I am not a full citizen."* Another participant (Ammar), when asked if he would ever consider running for office, laughed and said: *"Who would vote for someone like me? Voters do not trust a disabled person to defend their rights. Honestly, society doesn't see us as leaders"*. Such testimonies reveal the internalised stigma that many people with disabilities carry, having been repeatedly told – implicitly or explicitly – that they are less capable. All nine participants reported encountering negative attitudes from others in political contexts, ranging from patronising treatment and social exclusion to outright discrimination. These attitudes drained their confidence and desire to participate. As Rahahleh et al. (2021) observe, without exception, participants in the Jordan study faced stereotypes, stigma, and neglect, which *"discouraged them from wishing to pursue political participation in the future"*. Negative societal attitudes thus form a self-reinforcing barrier: people with disabilities are seen as non-political actors, leading others to exclude or discourage them, which in turn dissuades many from stepping forward.

The prevalence of such stigma in Jordan can be partly traced to the lingering influence of the medical model of disability in societal perceptions. Under this outdated viewpoint, disability is seen as an individual defect or *"illness,"* and thus people with disabilities are often viewed as incapable or weak. This model contrasts with the social model, which would place responsibility on society to remove barriers. Unfortunately, our findings indicate that the medical-model mindset – framing disabled individuals as inherently less competent – still influences how communities treat them in the political realm. Prior research confirms that in societies where the medical model prevails, people tend to doubt the abilities of persons with disabilities to perform public roles (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2013; McGrath, 2019). Participants in our study often internalised these low expectations. Several commented that they felt incapable or unqualified for political engagement, largely because that is what society has signalled to them over the years. The lack of any prominent role models further perpetuates this attitude. To date, Jordan has not had a high-profile politician or parliamentarian with a disability, a fact noted by participants (Rana) who remarked that they *"have never heard of a person with disabilities in a high position"* in politics. This absence of representation was also highlighted by Rahahleh et al. (2021), who noted that no individual with disabilities has held a high-status political post in Jordan, a reality that fuels negative attitudes and doubt about their political capabilities.

Stigma operates not only at the individual and community level but also within family dynamics. Some families, often out of overprotectiveness or social embarrassment, actively discourage members with disabilities from public participation. As one participant's story above illustrates, family members may urge their relatives to stay away from politics, believing it is not their place. Such family attitudes were also reported in other research; for example, a Jordanian focus group found that families often prevented relatives with disabilities from voting, especially if the person had an intellectual or mental disability. In conservative or rural settings, the idea of a disabled family member appearing in public political life might clash with social norms, leading to pressure to remain invisible. These societal and familial barriers reinforce a vicious cycle of exclusion and self-exclusion. When society at large questions the capability of persons with disabilities to contribute politically, it not only creates external obstacles but can also erode the self-confidence of these individuals. Our interviews clearly show that overcoming tangible barriers (legal, physical, informational) is necessary but not sufficient; without a change in public attitudes and the dismantling of stigma, persons with disabilities will continue to face an inhospitable environment in politics. This insight is echoed by experts who argue that transforming societal perceptions is as crucial as legal reforms for achieving inclusive participation.

Suggested Strategies

Addressing the multifaceted barriers identified above requires a comprehensive approach, targeting legal frameworks, physical accessibility, communication practices, and societal attitudes. Based on the findings of this study and evidence from broader research, a set of interconnected strategies is proposed to foster the political inclusion of persons with disabilities in Jordan.

Strengthening Legal Protections and Institutional Support

First, it is essential to fortify the legal and policy environment to explicitly protect and promote the political rights of persons with disabilities. It entails examining and revising any discriminatory constitutions that are still in place, such as the elimination of derailed clauses that deprive a voter of their voting rights based on their intellectual or psychosocial disability. The 2017 disability law in Jordan was a good base to start with, so the next move in legal reforms should entail no adult is restricted access to the voting ballot based on his/her disability, as it is the stipulation of the CRPD Article 29, which refers to the duty of equal political rights to the voting process. More than paper laws, effective enforcement should be put in place. The government needs to bring in laws that ensure even accessibility in every area of the election process and, most importantly, implement them. As an example, the implementation of building codes calling for accessible public facilities (including polling places) should be done with definite schedules and monitoring, so that the phrase, "accessible infrastructure" becomes regular rather than a special thing.

Election authorities like the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) should institutionalise inclusion by providing training for all election staff on disability accommodations and etiquette. Regular capacity-building sessions can prepare poll workers to assist voters who have various disabilities respectfully and effectively. Likewise, disability awareness and inclusion training should be extended to those working in government registries, local councils, and any bodies involved in the political process, to eliminate the ignorance and confusion our participants encountered. In addition, institutional support can

be improved by establishing dedicated units or liaisons for disability inclusion within the IEC and major political parties. Such units would be responsible for coordinating accommodations (like sign language interpreters, tactile ballots, etc.), disseminating information to voters with disabilities, and liaising with Disabled Persons' Organizations (DPOs) for feedback and monitoring. Political parties, for their part, should adopt internal policies to actively recruit, support, and mentor members and candidates with disabilities. Research suggests that when parties make conscious efforts to include underrepresented groups, it not only improves those groups' participation but also sensitises the whole party to their concerns (Waltz & Schippers, 2020).

Parties could, for example, waive or reduce membership fees and candidate registration fees for persons with disabilities, provide sign language interpreters at party meetings, and ensure meeting venues are accessible. Introducing voluntary quotas or targets for including people with disabilities as candidates or on party lists could also be considered, drawing on international examples of affirmative action. Strengthening legal and institutional support in these ways addresses the foundational framework – it sends a message that the political system *expects and welcomes* the participation of citizens with disabilities, rather than treating it as an afterthought.

Improving Physical Accessibility and Transportation

A second set of strategies focuses on the tangible environment in which political participation occurs. Ensuring that all polling stations and political venues are physically accessible is paramount. The government should conduct accessibility audits of polling locations well ahead of elections and allocate a budget for necessary modifications (ramps, handrails, wider doorways, accessible restrooms, proper signage, etc.). Where permanent fixes are not immediately feasible, temporary measures such as portable ramps or relocating polling sites to accessible buildings should be employed to guarantee that no voter is turned away due to architectural barriers. International best practices encourage providing “accessible polling stations” in every locality, and Jordan should aspire to meet that standard nationwide.

In parallel, accessible transportation must be addressed. Election day shuttles or transportation subsidies for voters with disabilities can mitigate the lack of accessible public transit in the short term. For longer-term solutions, investing in making public transportation disability-friendly (low-floor buses, wheelchair lifts, audio announcements, etc.) will greatly enhance not only political participation but also social inclusion more broadly. Collaboration with municipalities and the public transport authorities can identify key routes and vehicles to prioritise for upgrades. Additionally, mobility support services – such as on-call paratransit or volunteer driver programs on election days – could be expanded, perhaps in partnership with civil society. Studies have shown that when voters with disabilities know that they can get to polling sites without undue hardship, their likelihood of voting increases substantially (Schur et al., 2017). Therefore, eliminating transportation obstacles is a practical and necessary strategy to boost participation rates.

Enhancing Communication and Information Accessibility

To tackle the information gap, all facets of political communication must be made accessible and inclusive. This begins with voter education materials and election information. The IEC and related agencies should produce all public information (voter registration instructions,

how to vote, polling locations, etc.) in multiple formats: Braille brochures, large-print and high-contrast print, audio recordings, and easy-to-read versions for individuals with cognitive impairments. Crucially, election-related broadcasts and campaign debates should include real-time sign language interpretation and closed captioning. Broadcasters, in coordination with the electoral commission, could be mandated to provide sign language inset or captions for any official election programming.

Campaigns and candidates should also be encouraged – or required under guidelines – to make their communications accessible. For instance, campaign rallies can hire sign language interpreters and ensure speakers use microphones (so those with hearing aids can have audio input), and campaign websites should be tested for screen-reader compatibility. Our findings showed that a lack of sign language at events and inaccessible campaign literature left many potential voters disengaged; addressing these issues can have an immediate positive impact. Indeed, research by Scullion et al. (2013) underscores that improving communication channels is *central* to empowering political participation among people with disabilities.

In practice, this could mean establishing a fund or incentive for candidates to produce Braille manifestos and caption their online videos, under the supervision of the election commission. Moreover, targeted awareness campaigns are needed to reach persons with disabilities with information about their political rights. Government and DPOs might collaborate on outreach initiatives well before elections – for example, workshops or community meetings in accessible venues where voters with disabilities can learn about how to register, how voting works (with demonstrations of accessible voting tools), and why their votes matter. Such awareness efforts should also extend to rural and remote areas, where information gaps can be larger. By ensuring that communications are accessible and proactively informing citizens with disabilities about the accommodations and support available, authorities can reduce the knowledge barrier that currently exists. When voters are aware of their rights and confident that they can understand the process, they are far more likely to participate.

Challenging Stigma and Shifting Public Attitudes

Challenging Stigma and Changing the Attitudes of the People: The most challenging, but essential approach has to be the altering of the societal attitude, which ostracises people with disabilities in politics. Education and sensitisation of people, especially through the media, are major weapons in this area. The government, together with civil society and the media, should launch awareness campaigns highlighting the contributions and capabilities of persons with disabilities. For example, national media could run stories and interviews featuring successful activists or local leaders with disabilities to provide positive role models.

When the public regularly sees people with disabilities engaging in community initiatives, entrepreneurship, or advocacy, it normalises their presence in leadership spaces and begins to break down stereotypes. Schools and universities can also incorporate disability awareness in their civics or social studies curricula, instilling values of inclusion and equality from a young age. Another approach is to facilitate contact and dialogue: community forums or town hall meetings where citizens with and without disabilities discuss local issues together can humanise disability and dispel misconceptions. The involvement of religious and

community leaders in spreading messages of inclusion can further help shift mindsets in more traditional communities. As our findings and other studies indicated, families often internalise societal stigma, so outreach to families is important as well. Support programs or counselling for families of persons with disabilities could encourage them to empower, rather than shelter, their disabled members when it comes to civic activities.

On the policy side, visibly including persons with disabilities in public decision-making roles will combat stereotypes. Appointing qualified persons with disabilities to advisory boards, committees, or even as senators (where appointive seats exist) can demonstrate confidence in their abilities. In the long run, introducing role models in politics – for instance, through political parties' inclusion efforts or government appointments – may be one of the most powerful ways to change public perceptions. When voters see a person with a disability effectively performing as a council member, minister, or parliamentarian, prejudices about capability can gradually erode. As Karmel (2016) notes, transforming society's perceptions of disability is as crucial as legal changes in achieving inclusive politics. Therefore, sustained public awareness initiatives, coupled with the genuine empowerment of persons with disabilities to take visible roles, are recommended to tackle the attitudinal barriers. Over time, these strategies can foster a more inclusive political culture in Jordan – one where persons with disabilities are not seen through the lens of stigma, but recognised as equal participants and leaders in public life.

All these suggested strategies are interrelated. Improving laws and policies creates a mandate for accessibility; enhancing infrastructure and information flow enables people to act on those mandates; and reducing stigma ensures that people with disabilities are encouraged and confident to participate. By implementing evidence-informed measures across legal, physical, communicational, and social domains, Jordan can move closer to a truly inclusive political landscape where citizens with disabilities have an equal voice and presence. All the strategies support each other, and they can cover the essence of the findings of this study. In the end, the intention is to make it clear that political inclusion of people with disabilities is not only a stated right but a reality lived to by such individuals where impediments to their inclusion in politics are systematically dismantled and acceptance is dawning into a new state of affairs.

Conclusion

This paper has enlightened us on the experiences of the lives of individuals with disabilities in Jordan in terms of political participation. Employing the interviews with members of physical, visual, and hearing impairment groups, one can state that legal entitlements are not sufficient on their own to maintain efficient participation in the arena of politics. The access to infrastructure, availability and quality of information channels, institutional inadequacy, and a pervasive societal stigma have served to exclude and restrict the ability of people with disabilities to participate in democracy.

With progressive legal frameworks such as the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, implemented in Jordan, alongside their adherence to the CRPD, enforcement of the standards activators remains haphazard at best. Lack of political participation is usually limited by the logistical barriers and social attitudes expanding the cycle of exclusion and detachment.

To enable Jordan's transition to an inclusive democracy, there has to be more to the politics of policy pronouncements. It requires structural reform, specific outreach actions, strengthening of the political institutions, and popularisation of disability-inclusive practices at all levels of governance. However, above all, the voices and experiences of persons with disabilities should be put on the frontline in any attempts to transform and create inclusive political systems.

The results of the study highlight the necessity of translating legal entitlements into material practices. The inclusion of persons with disabilities and their empowerment into political life, which is equal to others, is not only an aspect of justice, but also a respectful way to the more equitable, representative, and participatory society in Jordan.

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