



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



International Foundation
for Electoral Systems



"AGATE"
RIGHTS DEFENSE CENTER
FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

“The Political Participation of Armenian Women with Disabilities: Barriers and Recommendations”



Research Project Report



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Research Team

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The list of abbreviations

- CEC – Central Electoral Commission
- CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women
- CRPD – Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- CSO – Civil Society Organization
- FGD – Focus Group Discussion
- IFES – International Foundation for Electoral Systems
- LSGB – Local Self-Government Bodies
- MM – Mass Media
- NA – National Assembly
- NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
- PR – Public Relations
- RA – Republic of Armenia
- SDG – Sustainable Development Goals
- UN – United Nations
- UPR – Universal Periodic Review
- USAID – United States Agency for International Development

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Finally, the research team expresses special gratitude to all focus group participants – women and men with and without disabilities from various rural and urban areas of Armenia, who participated in the research with great love and devotion and provided important and necessary information.

Introduction

This report presents the results of the research “Towards Inclusive Elections” project conducted by “Agate Rights Defense Center for Women with Disabilities” NGO with the support of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). The project was implemented with the financial assistance of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The aim of the research is to reveal the challenges that hinder political participation of women with disabilities and to identify the means to address them. The research methodology and its procedural aspects are presented in the first part of this report. Participation of persons with disabilities in research development and data collection constitutes the underlying principle of the work on this project. “Agate” NGO contacted the member organizations of the Coalition of Inclusive Reforms to reach out their beneficiaries and thanks to that, full participation of persons with different types of disabilities (especially youth with psychosocial disabilities and hearing or visual disabilities) was ensured during focus group discussions.

The research outcomes are presented in the second part of the report. The main factors that hinder civic and political participation of women with disabilities (such as lack of accessibility, lack of proper legislative regulations, etc.), also impact the political participation of men with disabilities. Yet the attitude of the public, the Armenian patriarchal society and indifference of the family increases the likelihood that women with disabilities are marginalized from political processes.

The report also reflects on the issues of participation of persons with disabilities in Armenia’s Velvet Revolution (hereinafter, the Velvet Revolution), focusing on their role in the formation of the content of the revolution and its process.

In the last part of this report, recommendations for civil society and state entities are presented.

Findings

Three central findings were made through this report.

- The key right ensuring the political participation of women with disabilities – participation in elections – is not ensured by the state,
- Women with disabilities can become very active in political life, if their awareness is raised and they are empowered. When they overcome their inner fears, they are able to develop their capacities very fast and become active both in civic and political life. (*including accessibility and inclusivity),
- The final key finding is women with disabilities have the capacity to detect and assess discrimination, so the State should actively involve women with disabilities in all legislation and policy making processes concerning them.

Other findings of the research are that political participation of women with disabilities in Armenia is considerably lower in comparison to other groups. Even so, the percentage of their involvement in online and offline discussion is even higher in comparison to those without disabilities, as in this case, they face less difficulties connected with accessible environment. Women with disabilities from urban areas are more active and have more opportunities to meet with officials than rural women with disabilities. Inaccessible transportation is a barrier to political participation, especially for persons with disabilities from rural areas. The attitude of CEC members can hinder the right to vote of persons with disabilities. Even men with disabilities have negative stereotypes towards political participation of women with disabilities.

Research Justification

According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, there are about 193,000 persons with disabilities registered in Armenia in 2018, of which 90,000 are women with disabilities. In Armenia only those persons who are recognized as disabled by RA medical and social expert examination committee can get services and social benefits. The disability recognition process is very complicated and has strict criteria in Armenia, as the government tries to save financial resources as much as possible. In reality the number of persons with disabilities is much higher. Similar to all women and girls with disabilities worldwide, women with disabilities in Armenia face additional numerous forms of discrimination while realizing their rights to education and employment, the right to health, the right to political participation and many other rights because of their gender and their disability.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Armenia in 2010, addresses the issue of political participation of persons with disabilities and the multiple discrimination of women with disabilities. Under Article 29, it establishes that States Parties shall guarantee political rights for persons with disabilities and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others. The States should 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”.

Under Article 6 it establishes that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination, and in this regard States Parties should take measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment by them of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. States Parties also should “take all appropriate measures to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the present Convention.”

In May 2017, the CRPD committee in its concluding observations to Armenia’s Initial Report recommends that the State take legal and other measures necessary to enable the political and public participation of all persons with disabilities, including with respect to their right to vote and stand for elections, ensure that voting procedures, facilities and materials are accessible for all persons with disabilities and promote the participation of persons with disabilities, in particular women, in political life and public decision-making.

Armenia also ratified the Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obliges States to promote and ensure of political participation of women, including those with disabilities.

Aiming to examine the level of political participation of women with disabilities, identify the barriers to such participation and the means to overcome them, the study will thus contribute to the monitoring of the implementation of the State’s obligations under the CRPD and CEDAW.

The recommendations presented at the end of the study will also contribute to the improvement of the legislation and the respective state policy to make it more inclusive and to ensure the full realization of the right of women with disabilities to participate in political and public life of the country.

Research Methodology

Guided by the principle “Nothing about us, without us”, persons with disabilities and disability organizations fully participated in all the stages of research, including development of the methodology, adaptation of the tools and data collection.

The research utilized the Intersectionality Assessment Framework developed by IFES and contextualized for this report by Agate. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were chosen as the main method of data collection, and integrated principles of participatory evaluation, including: democratic mechanisms to ensure multiple perspectives were documented, facilitation that solicited opinions from those who may otherwise not speak up, as well as engaging participants themselves in the analysis of quantitative data findings. Six FGDs were conducted. The composition of each focus group varied in order to control for key variables such as: gender, disability, and location (urban versus rural).

The research tool ensures participatory procedure through a visual and shareable platform. Brainstorming and working in groups of 2 or 3 people ensures that everyone contributes to the analysis.

The procedure was as inclusive as possible for participants with disabilities. Images were described by the moderator for participants with visual disabilities. Sign language interpretation was provided for participants with hearing disabilities.

Six FGD were conducted within the following groups:

- 12 women with disabilities living in urban areas (Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, Artik),
- 12 men with disabilities living in urban areas (Yerevan, Gyumri, Hoktemberyan, Gavar),
- 12 women with disabilities living in rural areas (village Horom, Jrapı, Voskehask, Lusaghbyur, Shirakavan, Spitak),
- 9 men with disabilities living in rural areas (village Marmashen, Artik region, Spitak, Saratak),
- 12 urban and rural women without disabilities (Sisian, Yerevan. Abovyan, Gyumri, Yerevan, village Tairov, village Shirakavan), and
- 9 urban and rural men without disabilities (Gyumri, Vanadzor, village Dzoraghbyur, Spitak, village Horom).

In addition to FGDs, interviews were conducted with two active women with disabilities; one of them is involved in non-governmental sector and the other one is active in political processes.

As presented in the introductory part of Annex 1 to the Guidelines of this research, the participants shared their examples of political and civic participation through brainstorming exercises. As a result, under the guidance of the moderator, the group came up with the most acceptable definition of these categories that could be understandable for all. Once this first part of the discussion was successfully completed, the group proceeded to discussions around the subject matter of the research, i.e. political participation of women with disabilities.



Focus group discussion with men with disabilities from urban areas

The core activity within this stage was the force field analysis, which is conducted once again through brainstorming, as well as through small group work (2-3 people per group). In this exercise, participants identified helpful and hindering factors for political participation of women with disabilities as well as recommendations for addressing them. Participants took part in an open survey in the last stage. Here, facilitators presented participants with five statements related to the main issue. Participants then took an open vote to assess their level of agreement with those statements.

In the scope of the research, an open expert group discussion was organized around two issues: 1) participation of women with disabilities in the Velvet Revolution, 2) the gaps in the decree by RA Government (2016) concerning the provision of additional opportunities for making the voting process more inclusive for those who have difficulties in voting.

Main Definitions

In the context of this report, persons with disabilities include, as defined in the CRPD, those who 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.

The term “political participation” encompasses the actions of citizens that are meant to influence political outcomes within the given society, for example voting or running for office.

The term “civic engagement” is conditionally related to such activities of ordinary citizens that are meant to impact social realities, provided that those realities concern others and go beyond the circle of one’s personal and family life. Such realities also include issues of the sociopolitical environment.

Results

Political and Civic Participation

The definitions of political and civic participation were formed as a result of a participatory discussion. Whereas the participants of the discussion had contradicting opinions, under the guidance of the moderator, all the justifications and arguments were expressed until the point when the group came up with a definition that was understandable for all and could be used in the scope of the research (*see*, “Main Definitions”).

The forms of political and civic participation and engagement of the research participants, as well as the scope of their engagement and participation, is presented below.

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Table 1.

	All participants	Persons without disabilities	Persons with disabilities	Urban women with disabilities	Rural women with disabilities	Women with disabilities	Women without Disabilities
	<i>(out of 60)</i>	<i>(out of 20)</i>	<i>(out of 40)</i>	<i>(Out of 10)</i>	<i>(Out of 9)</i>	<i>(out of 19)</i>	<i>(out of 12)</i>
Political participation							
Participation in the elections	87%	90%	85%	80%	89%	84%	83%
Participation in demonstrations and rallies	65%	70%	63%	60%	33%	47%	58%
Party affiliation	18%	35%	10%	0%	11%	5%	25%
Election observation	15%	20%	13%	20%	11%	16%	8%
Being a proxy/trustee at the elections	8%	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	8%
Participation in labor strikes and student protests	7%	0%	10%	10%	0%	5%	0%
Membership/Chairmanship at the Electoral Commissions	5%	10%	3%	0%	0%	0%	17%
Participation at the hearings around political decisions	5%	0%	8%	30%	0%	16%	0%
Employment at a state institution (including taking a post)	5%	0%	8%	20%	0%	11%	0%
Nomination as an electoral candidate	7%	5%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Offline and online political discussions	17%	0%	25%	30%	22%	26%	0%
Expression of one's political position/opinion	33%	60%	20%	30%	22%	26%	100%

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Civic participation							
Participation in demonstrations and rallies around social causes	18%	50%	3%	0%	0%	0%	50%
Participation in tree planting or community work	48%	62%	40%	70%	44%	58%	17%
Being an NGO leader or member	38%	24%	43%	70%	56%	63%	25%
Environmental activism	8%	14%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%

The percentage displayed in Table 1 shows that political participation of women with disabilities is considerably lower in comparison to other groups. But the percentage of their involvement in online and offline discussion is even higher in comparison to those without disabilities, as in this case, they face less difficulties connected with accessible environment (transportation, buildings, etc.).

Rural women with disabilities have even lower participation both in political and civic life in comparison to women with disabilities from urban locations.

Despite the fact that election-related procedures were attributed to politics during almost all group discussions, independent election observations for some of the participants remained at the crossroads of political and civic participation. This was also true for participation in demonstrations and rallies: depending on the content of the protest, its purpose, slogans, driving motives and participation might be both of political (as it was for the Velvet Revolution) and of civic nature (as it was for the “Electric Yerevan” protests).

Apart from indicating factors that differentiate political and civic participation, the participants generally see an intrinsically intertwined relationship between political and civic participation.

“Political participation is one of the best manifestations of citizenship because the best citizen should be politically active.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan.

The Inclusive Velvet Revolution

As a result of demonstrations, rallies and mass actions of civil disobedience that commenced in April of this year, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia Serj Sargsyan resigned on April 23. After his resignation, the National Assembly chose the “people’s candidate” Nikol Pashinyan as the new Prime Minister of Armenia.

Women with disabilities played an active role during the Velvet Revolution. Zara Batoyan, an outstanding disabled woman and a disability activist, participated in all the political proceedings and actions in Armenia. During the Velvet Revolution, she found that she could create the sound of “inclusiveness”. Batoyan came up with the idea of a ‘pots and pans’ protest that would be executed within homes. It was Batoyan's idea to rouse people to create 15 minutes of noisy din starting at 11 p.m. as part of the mass anti-government protests that were taking place during the Velvet Revolution. The noise created by thousands of women banging pots and pans together could have been described as a cacophony. Zara was able to suggest an inclusive protest idea to connect all the people who were not physically on the streets but wanted to participate in the protests. During the ‘pots and pans’ protest, many people who desired to take part in the protests but were not able to leave their home, not only limited to women with disabilities, were able to participate.

For some, disabilities and the lack of accessibility, prevented them from taking to the streets, for others however, it was Armenia's patriarchal society:



Zara Batoyan, a disability activist and an outstanding disabled woman is talking in Yerevan Republic Square during the Velvet Revolution Mass Demonstration

Arev Melkonyan, a woman who uses a wheelchair, was on the frontline of demonstrations and strikes. Melkonyan remained outside to show her friends and community that the political struggle is important for everyone, and all the people in Armenia, including the disabled community and all women, could benefit from the political changes in the country.

Expert group discussion carried out in the scope of this study revealed that inclusiveness was one of the most prominent aspects of this revolution. Thus, the initiatives that commenced in Gyumri were marked with the participation of both women and men of all ages, from different cities, with different professional backgrounds. Older persons, children, and persons with disabilities also took part in the initiatives that were organized in Gyumri.

The experts, active young people with disabilities, confirmed that participation of persons in Velvet Revolution certainly contributed:

1. To the increase of the level of **active political involvement** of other citizens.

“I do not think that we, persons with disabilities, are somehow small in all these processes, since when I was walking with a white cane together with a woman with a disability, people would take photos of us and would say, “Good for you, man!” Those were the moments when I would say, “You see, my friend, what kind of motivation we can give to others to come out of their homes and take part in this joint fight!”

Man with a visual disability, Yerevan

“Here, in Gyumri, I became the symbol of demonstrations. People would say “Even if you just come and stand in the Square, you will already inspire the rest of us.”

Man with a physical disability, Gyumri

2. To a rise in **political consciousness** of other citizens.

“I strongly value political “education” and raising the political consciousness of persons with disabilities. For instance, when I was giving a speech, I realized that it’s important not because I am important or I say good stuff but because people were looking at me, women and men with disabilities were looking at me. I was delivering my speech exactly for them, so that they would stop feeling invisible, they would be spoken about, they would feel inspired.”

Woman with a disability involved in politics, Yerevan

3. To voicing the issue of **social inclusion of persons with disabilities** including challenges related to inclusive education.

“Let’s take the case of Grandma Nella, who has hearing difficulties. For instance, she would always stand in the first row so she could read lips. That was the first time I learned from the media that someone read lips. The same old lady was talking about education-related challenges she experienced because of her disability.”

Man with a disability, Yerevan

4. To the **peaceful and non-violent** spirit of the revolution.

“Taking the advantage of the fact that because of certain reasons the policemen would not arrest me, I took on myself the role of the mediator between the protestor and the police officer.”

Man with a disability, Gyumri

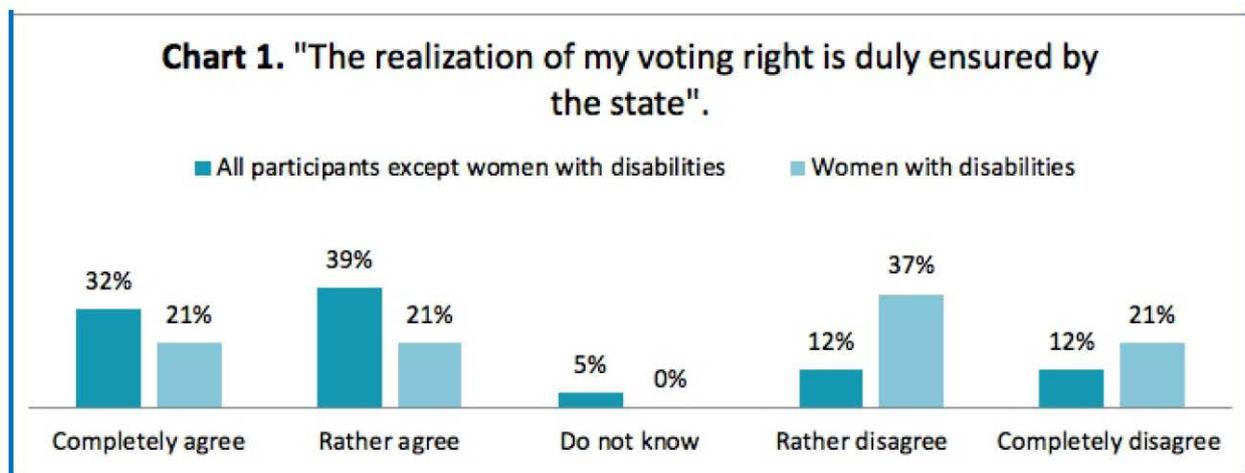


Karine Grigoyan, a woman with a disability and a NGO leader from Gyumri is signing a Political Policy Platform with the representative of "Free Democrats" Political Party before the Parliamentary elections in Armenia.

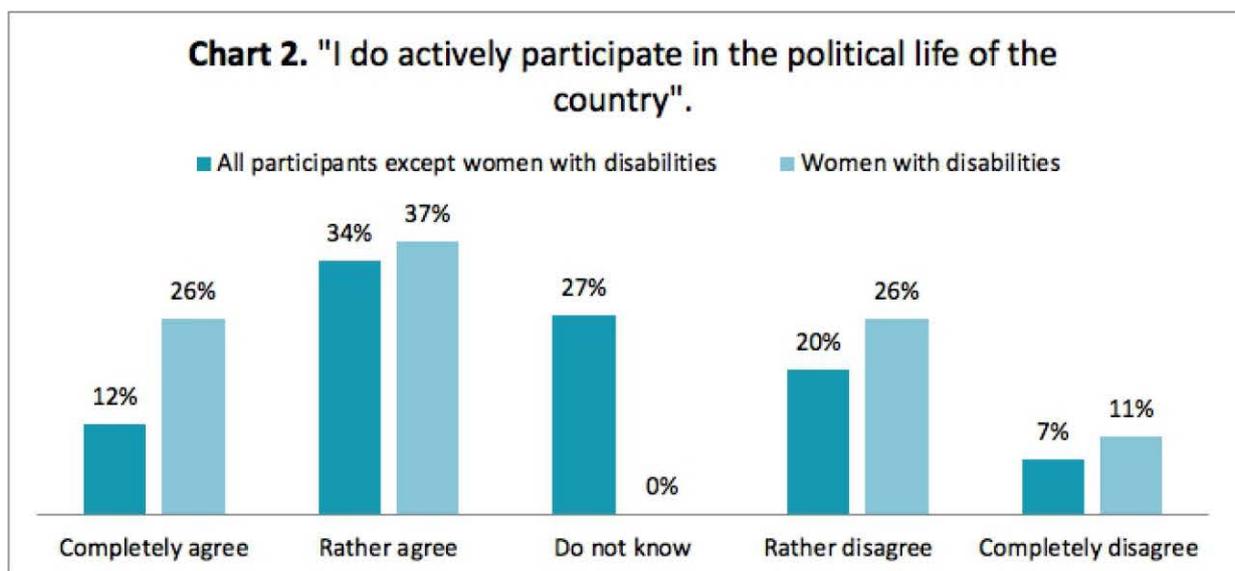
Five Questions

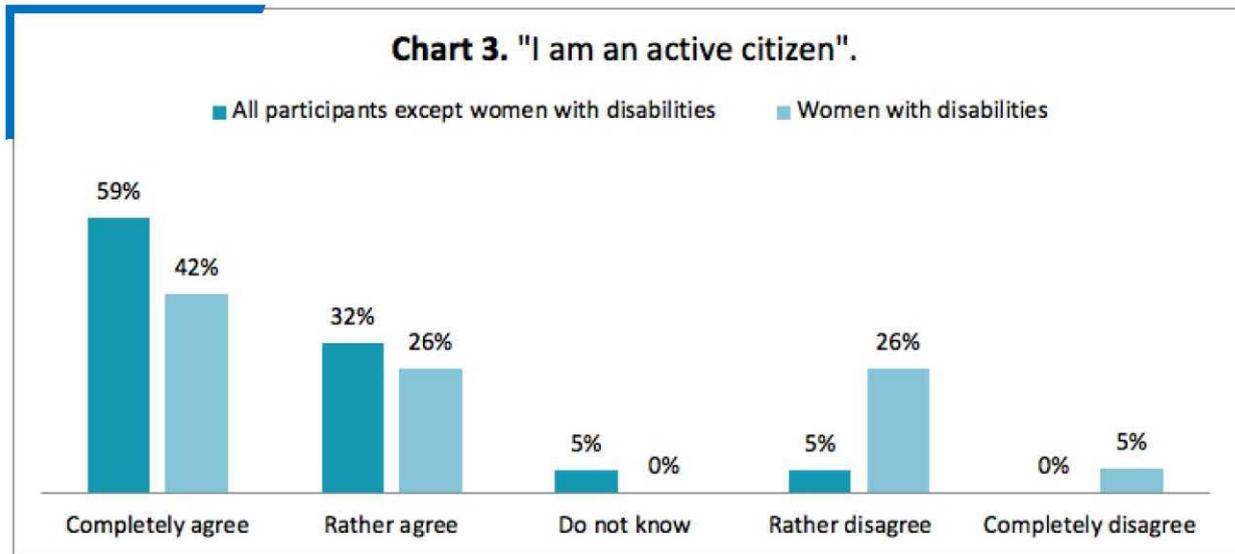
Each of the 60 participants of the six focus groups answered five questions. Below presented is the distribution of answers, with disaggregated data from women respondents.

Chart 1 shows that, in comparison to other groups, the overwhelming majority of women with disabilities think that state bodies do not ensure the realization of their right to full participation in elections.

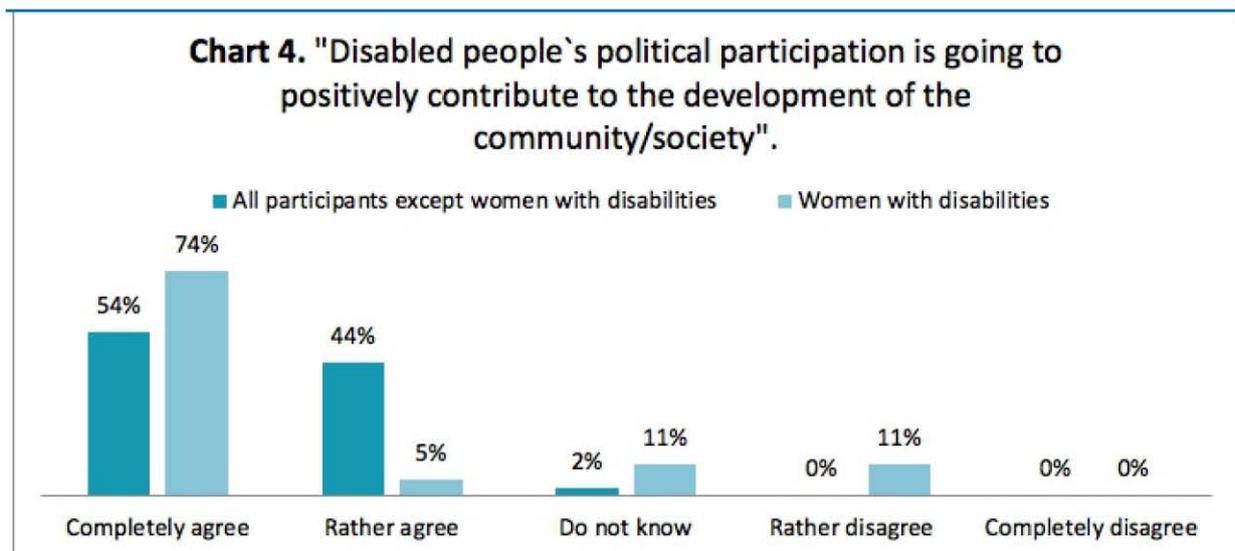


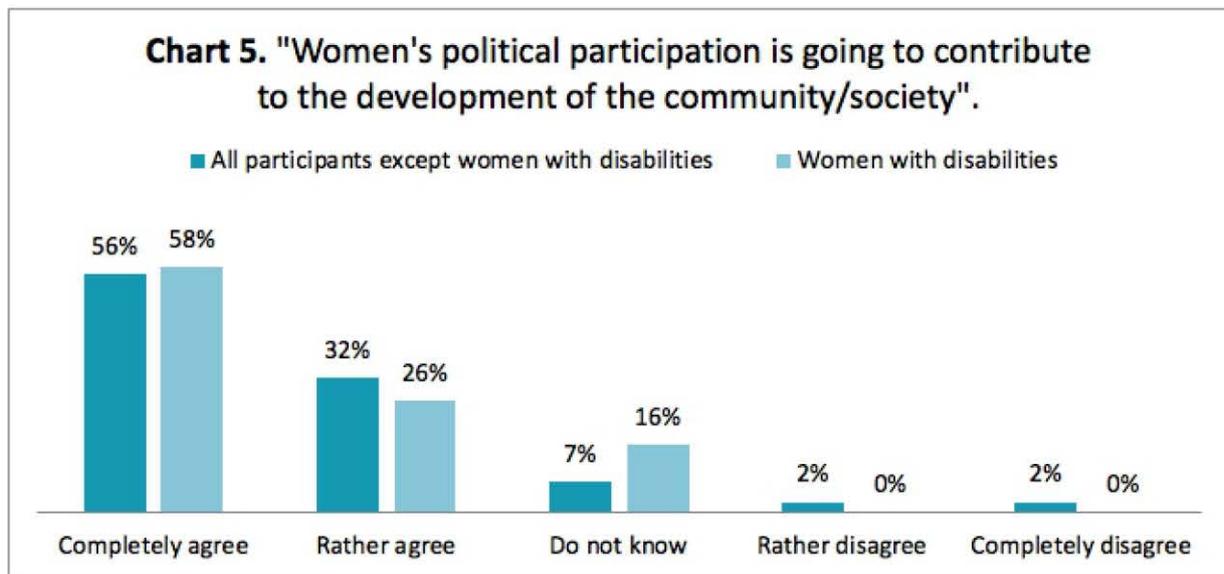
Women with disabilities, in comparison to other groups, also gave low marks to their own political and civic participation (Charts 2 and 3).





It should be concluded from Charts 2 and 3 that the majority of women with disabilities agreed they actively participate in the political life and are active citizens. This is likely a result of the participants selected for the FGDs, who were relatively active women with disabilities, many of whom are members of some non-governmental organizations and coalitions.





Charts 3 and 4 show that the participants mostly think that the participation of both women and other persons with disabilities in different levels of political processes will have a positive impact on the development of the community and the country.

Comparing charts 4 and 5, we can see that no participants with disabilities disagreed that their involvement can contribute to the development of the society, while 2% of other participants disagree and another 2% completely disagree with the statement that the involvement of women with disabilities in politics can be beneficial.

In support of their opinions, the participants mentioned:

- Persons with disabilities are better skilled at facing issues and participating in solving them. They have faced various barriers during their daily life and were able to find solutions to overcome these obstacles, so they will be very creative and useful in participating in their community and country development,
- The issues of women and persons with disabilities should be addressed by representatives of these groups themselves,
- Our constitution states that all citizens have the same rights to engage in politics.

Challenges that Hinder Political Participation of Women with Disabilities and the Ways to Address them

Lack of Accessibility of Polling Stations

Almost all the groups talked about lack of accessibility of polling stations, emphasizing the importance of participation in the elections as the cornerstone of political participation. By “accessibility”, FGD participants mean the condition of ramps at the poll entrance, sufficient door width, availability of handrails, convenience of voting booths for persons with physical disabilities, availability of braille forms for persons with visual disabilities, as well as other adaptive technologies for persons with different forms of disabilities.

“I was offered to be an observer for the previous parliamentary elections, but judging the real situation, the inaccessibility of the constituencies and the toilets, as I was going to stay inside for a long time, I refused the offer.”

A Rural woman who uses a wheelchair

“There are two polling stations in our district; both of them are inaccessible for wheelchair users.”

Woman with a physical disability, Yerevan

The participants also mentioned the absence of tactile ballots during elections in 2017.

“I didn’t participate in the last parliamentary elections because they changed all electoral code and procedures, and there wasn’t enough time to provide tactile ballots”

Man with a visual disability, Yerevan

The discussion group of women with disabilities also mentioned the absence of specially trained staff at the polling stations, which again contributes to the inaccessibility of the polls.

Considering the lack of accessibility of polling stations as a primary challenge, FGD participants offer the following:

- Voice the problem through protests and demonstrations,
- CRPD monitoring under the leadership of women with disabilities,
- Advocacy activities under the leadership of women with disabilities.

“It is necessary to participate in discussions and hearings around the draft law on the rights of persons with disabilities and their social inclusion, to make recommendations to the law in the way this is being advocated by the Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

- Appeals and inquiries to Local Self-Government Bodies,
- Legislative reforms,
 - Under the umbrella of the Coalition for Inclusive Legal Reforms, active participation of persons with disabilities in the discussions and hearings on the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Social Inclusion Thereof
- Inclusion of provisions concerning the ethics of treatment of persons with disabilities in the training curriculum for CEC members at all levels,
- Advocacy for more budget allocations for the field,
- Representation of the issue in the mass media and through social advertising.

"Development of the model of inclusive education at schools and kindergartens also contributes to more inclusive polling stations, since election processes are usually organized in education institutions."

A rural man without disability

Lack of Accessibility of Political Campaigns

Inaccessibility of political campaigning is another election-related factor that especially hinders the right of political participation of persons with visual and hearing disabilities and persons with intellectual disabilities during their participation in the elections. This is manifested in absence of braille formats, subtitles, captions, lack of audio versions, lack of sign language translators, as well as inaccessibility of texts for people with learning disabilities, which violate the principle of independent formation of political positions of persons with disabilities.

Campaigning process is also inaccessible for persons with physical disabilities, as the rallies are generally held in inaccessible and crowded environment.

"There was no sign language interpretation during the campaign, so I did not understand anything. And during the elections, my parents have always directed me whom to elect."

Woman with a hearing disability, Yerevan

"As the election campaigns are not accessible for me, I have never participated in elections, since I do not understand the whole campaign and do not know whom to trust."

Rural women with hearing disability

“Women with hearing disabilities have relatively low political participation because of their lack of interest in the elections due to inaccessibility of the campaign. Women with hearing disabilities, especially in the regions, are more isolated in their families and are always busy with their everyday family affairs. Meanwhile, the community of men with hearing disabilities is more active, they meet more often, communicate and share information, which contributes to their political participation.”

Woman with a disability, NGO leader, Gyumri

The following solutions were proposed as a result of discussions:

- Determine demands and recommendations for legislative changes (importantly, concrete mechanisms for the improvement of the legislation was proposed),
- Organize training seminars for journalists,
- Media monitoring from the perspective of protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

“The State should take the responsibility to finance and control the work of the TV, in order to ensure availability of accessible information for persons with disabilities.”

Woman without a disability, Vanadzor

“The mass media should charge additional money from the customers for provision of sign language translation so that the information is accessible to persons with hearing disabilities.”

Woman without a disability, Yerevan



Focus group discussion with women with disabilities from rural areas.

The Attitude of the Public

The attitude of the public as a challenge was once again mentioned in almost all group discussions. In Armenia there isn't negative attitude towards persons with disabilities, but still now there are stereotypes and perceptions on the capacities and skills of persons with disabilities. They are viewed as subject of care, protection and charity. Very often additional care and attention, caution not to insult a person with disability leads to low self-esteem and isolation, which greatly effects on their participation both in civic and political life. The participants mentioned that due to the attitude of the public women with disabilities indeed face double discrimination.

“I participated in the elections as an observer. My family was not an obstacle, but people in my environment urged me not to go. They were telling me: “Why do you need to participate in the election? You're a disabled woman, you will get tired, and then there's danger, you will be in trouble. But I found strength in me and I went. I had a feeling people did not trust me because of my status.”

A rural woman with a disability

The inaccessible physical environment also has its negative influence on the electoral campaign process of persons with disabilities.

“During my electoral campaign when my team members were distributing informative leaflets about me, many people looked at my picture and saw I am a wheelchair user, they doubted and expressed their concerns and told: ‘How she would manage to be in parliament, if she hardly can take care of herself’ ”.

Woman with a disability involved in politics, Yerevan

Armenia is a patriarchal society and due to the stereotypes on the role of women and the capacities of persons with disabilities, the participants mentioned that women with disabilities indeed face double discrimination.

“Patriarchal society and stereotypes hinder the political participation of women with disabilities. The society has stereotypes seeing us in the streets and protesting. They think, “What?? They have a disability and went into the street? Despite of disability they are also women”. They look at us and as if want to say, “What are you doing? Go home and stay inside quietly.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

“A woman with a disability in Armenia will think a thousand times and then will behave, and again will hesitate whether it is worth going out at night to participate in a demonstration or a rally, but the man with a disability doesn't have such a problem. Because we have to take a taxi to get to the demonstration place and we shall be judged by neighbors, as women don't take taxi alone at night.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

The attitude of CEC members, who are also members of the public, can hinder the right to vote of persons with disabilities.

During the last decade Armenian society has changed its discriminatory attitude towards the persons with physical and sensory disabilities, but when speaking on persons with psychosocial disabilities, we face a number of discrimination and obstacles.

In Armenia persons with psychosocial disabilities, who are deprived from their legal capacity are not allowed to vote.

Further, persons with psychosocial disabilities who are able to participate in elections and go to vote with their family members are faced with discrimination from poll workers while standing in line at the polling station and waiting their turn. Most of the poll workers do not have the necessary skills, training, and behavior to interact with persons with psychosocial disabilities. Family members always direct them to vote and etc.

“As soon as persons with psychosocial disabilities enter the polling stations, the members of the commission start complaining.”

Woman with disability, Yerevan

Another barrier that was mentioned was that men are more trusted in politics, than women.

“Within my political fraction sometimes I felt skepticism towards me. Though that wasn’t expressed verbally, I could feel from their attitude. Though all of them knew my intellectual and leadership capacities.”

Woman with a disability involved in politics, Yerevan



Focus group discussion with women with disabilities from urban areas

From the focus group discussions, we found out that even men with disabilities have stereotypes towards political participation of women with disabilities.

“A woman with a disability can work, be an active citizen, but she can’t be in high levels of politics. In order to be in politics, you should be very powerful. Women should always be feminine; I don’t like women acting like men.”

Man with a disability, Yerevan

In the group discussions several solutions were proposed:

- Dissemination of social ads and success stories through media and social media,
- Inclusive education, that, over time, cultivates citizens who are informed of human rights,
- Advocacy activities by civil society organizations (CSOs) that are aimed to shift public attitude.

The Attitude of the Family

Especially women mention that, apart from public attitude, the social microenvironment - the family, can be both as a supportive and hindering factor.

The Armenian family has always been known for its moral stamina and stable traditions, where connection between parent and child is very strong. If we speak about children with disabilities, Armenian families can be overprotective, which leads to their isolation. But we have cases that families encouraged their family member with a disability to be independent and follow their goals.

“It is often necessary to send people with certain disabilities (hearing, visual disability) to study in special schools in Yerevan because the only specialized schools are in Yerevan. As a result, especially women with disabilities do not get education, [so they] stay at home, feel reserved and scared. And even after they have the desire to learn, until they reach the conscious level and want to lead an active life, it is often too late to achieve the desired result.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

The families of rural women with disabilities often persuade them for whom to vote.

“I do not trust anyone, but I have always participated in the elections against my will, since my family members would always persuade me for whom to vote.”

A rural woman with a disability

The selected groups propose the following measures to address this challenge:

- Seminars organized by NGOs for family members of persons with disabilities,
- Assistance of social workers to family members at the request of NGOs,
- Assistance of social workers to family members at the request of the State,
- Awareness-raising through social advertising, cartoons, movies, mass media,
- Inclusive education.

“When visiting a school that provides inclusive education, the family of a child with disability gets introduced to her/his rights from an early age. In the future, it contributes both to the right approach of the parents, as well as other fields, apart from education.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

Lack of Accessibility of Public Transportation

Women and men in rural areas emphasized inaccessible public transportation as a priority challenge in the context of the realization of the right to political participation. Inaccessible transportation is a core concern with those who have physical disabilities; hampering their right to reach polling stations, participate in demonstrations, and conduct one’s personal political campaign.

“I was actively participating in the Velvet Revolution, I was writing Facebook posts and asking to come and take me to Gyumri to participate in the demonstrations during the velvet revolution, but because of transportation issues I was unable to take part.”

A rural woman with a disability

“The only transportation vehicle for wheelchair users in Armenia, especially in the provinces and rural areas, is a taxi. Taxi drivers are mostly men, and women with disabilities do not feel comfortable when a foreigner helps them, tries to lift them, put them into or out of the car. The members of our organization often raise this issue. That is why they are left out of many political processes. There is no such problem for men with disabilities.”

Women with a disability, NGO leader, Gyumri

The very few solutions for addressing these challenges can be divided into two groups:

- Appeals and demands to local self-governing bodies and NGOs,
- Raising the issue through protests and demonstrations.

Lack of Self-Confidence of Women with Disabilities

During the discussions, opinions were expressed that the lack of self-confidence of persons with disabilities stemmed from their lack of opportunities for education or preparation, treatment by their community, and generally not being socially included.

“The thinking of women with disabilities, their inner frustration of being incompetent, fears and lack of self-confidence have a major impact on their political participation. A woman with a disability is completely different from a man with a disability, as they get different education and are brought up differently since their childhood.

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

“In my life there was a period when I completely isolated myself. I didn’t have any interaction with outside world. I was ashamed of being a woman with a disability. However, when I had the opportunity to get acquainted with other people with disabilities and I made my step, I became more active. So internal self-confidence is very important.”

Rural woman with a disability

Accordingly, the following recommendations for the settlement of the problem were proposed:

- Developing capacities of women-leaders with disabilities by the state and raising the political awareness of others by their example,
- Raising awareness of persons with disabilities through trainings and workshops on the rights topics organized by the NGOs,
- Improvement of public attitude through TV programs, awareness-raising campaigns,
- Individual or group psychological discussions organized by NGOs, which will contribute to the development of inferiority complex management skills,
- Developing capacities of family members of women with disabilities by NGOs,
- Capacity development of women with disabilities will also contribute to the improvement of public attitude.

“If a woman with a disability is informed and educated, and she educates the society on her example, the society will also assist her with attitude. In other words, it is a change of affiliated attitude.”

Woman with a disability, Yerevan

Social Conditions

Social conditions constitute a strong obstacle to political participation, since they impact one’s ability to communicate, which is a key factor for inclusion in contemporary political environment.

“For instance, the lack of opportunity to constantly use the internet impacts an individual’s awareness of political events and their ability to form a political opinion.”

Woman without a disability, Yerevan

According to Focus group discussion participants, the following measures should be taken which can directly or indirectly contribute to the resolution of this obstacle.

- Creation of jobs by the state,
- Increase of pensions by the state for those who are unable to work,
- Providing free transportation,
- Organization of business trainings for women with disabilities by charitable and non-governmental organizations,
- Capacity building of women with disabilities through accessible vocational education to enable them to become fully competitive in the labor market.

Non -inclusive Legislation

One of the manifestations of non-inclusive legislation is the absence of quotas for women with disabilities :

- Special groups, creation of coalitions, mobilization of those who will stand for the rights of women with disabilities,
- Advocacy around the recommendations for legislative changes concerning the law on the rights of persons with disabilities and their social inclusion,
- Involvement of women with disabilities in the discussion of the aforementioned law.

Non-inclusive Childhood

An inclusive childhood, the main component of which is inclusive education, contributes to the formation of an appropriate position both in the woman with a disability and in her family member. This position is the realization of the full right to education and other areas of social life, which also addresses civic and political participation. The inclusive educational system can remove this obstacle from nursery school.

Other Obstacles

Among other obstacles, incomplete electoral procedures related to confidentiality were a barrier to participation of women with disabilities.

Disabled women who are candidates face technical issues to organize their campaigns.

The physical inaccessibility of municipalities and other state buildings is a big obstacle for political activists with physical disabilities.

Corruption risks in the face of threats were also marked, which are more likely to affect women with disabilities.

“There is tension between our village mayor and me because I rejected the proposal of his sister to vote for his brother's candidacy during the election. After his being elected, I faced many obstacles, but those obstacles did not change my thinking. Years ago, when I was not informed about my rights, I also obeyed their dictations, but by participating in numerous seminars, meetings I acquired skills and now I can protect my own rights.”

A rural woman with a disability

Contributing Factors

Discussions show that there are fewer incentives for women with disabilities to get involved in politics. However, there are specific helpful factors that enable women to participate, in particular:

- Public trust: some participants of the discussion are confident, that women with disabilities enjoy higher levels of trust among voters. In Armenia, when a woman with a disability is involved in politics and is running for elections, the public generally respects them, as they have faced a lot of difficulties and overcome many challenges in their lives, and if elected they will do their best for improve their community and country,
- International obligations: Republic of Armenia (RA) has ratified CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, CRPD, European Convention on Human Rights and Optional Protocol, Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and is obligated to involve both women and persons with disabilities in different spheres of life, including political life,
- Public image: This is already a new public demand. During last parliamentary elections four women with disabilities were involved as candidates in the political

parties, which resulted in a “competition” among political parties to demonstrate their inclusiveness.

“Political parties and other structures that involve persons with disabilities in employment solely for the purpose of enhancing the rating of their organization.”

Woman with disability from Yerevan

- Tolerance: The criticism towards women with disabilities in politics is very mild.
Since women with disabilities are perceived as a weaker minority, once they are in politics other political fraction representatives try to be more careful and not insult them, as they don’t see a woman with a disability as an actual threat.

“There were times I was criticizing other political party representatives, but they were more tolerant towards me. They didn’t target me and their criticism was very mild. I think it is because I am a woman using a wheelchair.”

Woman with disability involved in politics, Yerevan

- Mass media coverage: participants report a trend of positive mass media coverage on disability issues, especially success stories.



Focus group discussion with men without disabilities from urban and rural areas

Recommendations to the State

➤ Legislative reforms

Review and make amendments in RA Electoral code

Decree by RA Government concerning the provision of additional opportunities for making the voting process more inclusive for those who have difficulties in voting (2016) does not fully ensure the equal participation of persons with different disabilities in elections and does not cover all the manifestations of discrimination that persons with disabilities face during both elections and pre-electoral processes.

- Ensure accessibility of electoral campaign for persons with different types of disabilities (including sign language interpretation for persons with hearing disabilities and easy-to-read format of information for persons with intellectual and learning disabilities),
- Review and ensure the right to vote of persons deprived of legal capacity,
- Set temporary quotas for being elected to the National Assembly for women with disabilities to foster their political participations.

➤ Develop the institute of the social worker

The social worker will contribute to the capacity development of women with disabilities in the spheres of rights protection and civic consciousness.

➤ Ensure quality inclusive education

Inclusive education implemented in schools and kindergartens, in the buildings of which voting processes are organized, ensure not only the education of persons with disabilities, but also educate their families and communities and provide practical ideas about human rights and inclusiveness.

➤ Ensure mass media accessibility

The state should guarantee the accessibility of political coverage in mass media, this contributing to the political involvement (awareness) of persons with disabilities, which will become grounds for political participation.

- The training sessions for persons involved in electoral commissions must include information about communications and ethics of dealing with persons with disabilities,
- Ensure the availability of accessible public transportation all over Armenia by reviewing the RA decree on public transportation by setting an obligatory condition that all new purchased buses should be accessible,
- Ensure participation of women with disabilities and their organizations in all policy and legislation programming process.

- Monitoring and data collection.

The State monitors and has clear statistics from disability and gender perspective in all phases of election.

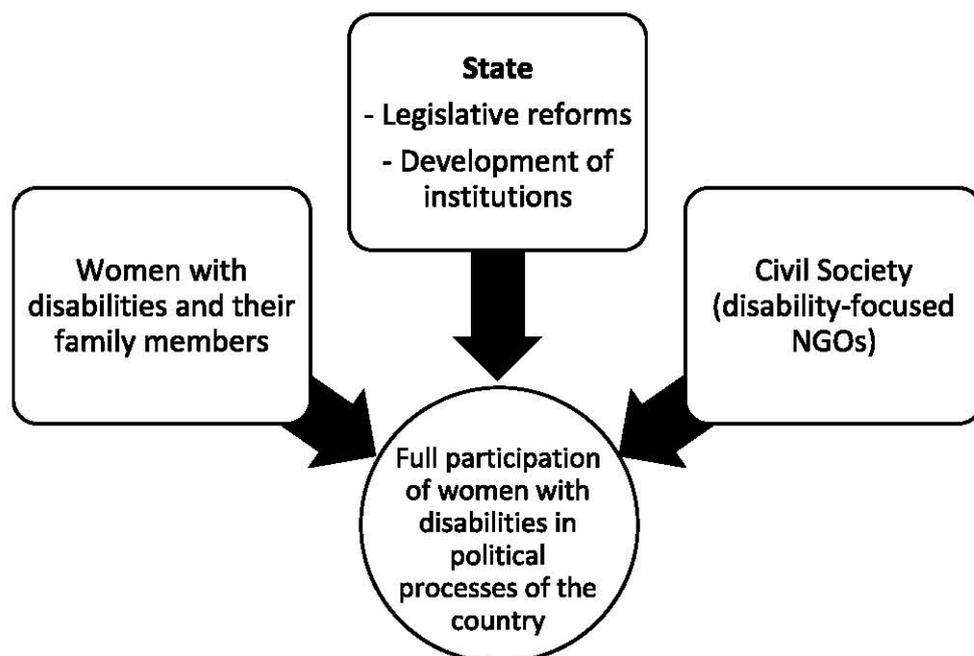
To NGOs/Civil Society

- Advocacy aimed at improving public attitudes and awareness raising,
- Training women with disabilities on their right to political participation and its full realization,
- Civic monitoring initiatives, especially during pre-electoral and electoral processes.

Conclusion

Three central findings were made, as shown on Chart 1: 1) the key right ensuring the political participation of women with disabilities – participation in elections – is not ensured by the state, 2) Once the awareness of women with disabilities is raised and they are empowered, they overcome their inner fears, develop their capacities very fast and become active both in civic and political life and 3) women with disabilities have the capacity to detect and assess discrimination.

Moreover, as it was expected, persons with disabilities have the best command of barriers to their political participation and ways of addressing them. Research participants specified three factors addressing participation barriers, which are presented in the diagram below. The role of each of these factors increases or decreases depending on the nature of the barrier.



*The Political Participation of Armenian Women with Disabilities:
Barriers and Recommendations
“Agate Rights Defense Center for Women with Disabilities” NGO*

Factors contributing to the political participation of women with disabilities are the International Conventions and respective obligations assumed by the state. Another opportunity is the domestic political trend: having women or persons with disabilities as members of political parties enhances their rating.

Although these factors contribute to the involvement of women with disabilities in politics, they do not provide systemic solutions to the fundamental political right – the realization of the right to equal participation in elections.

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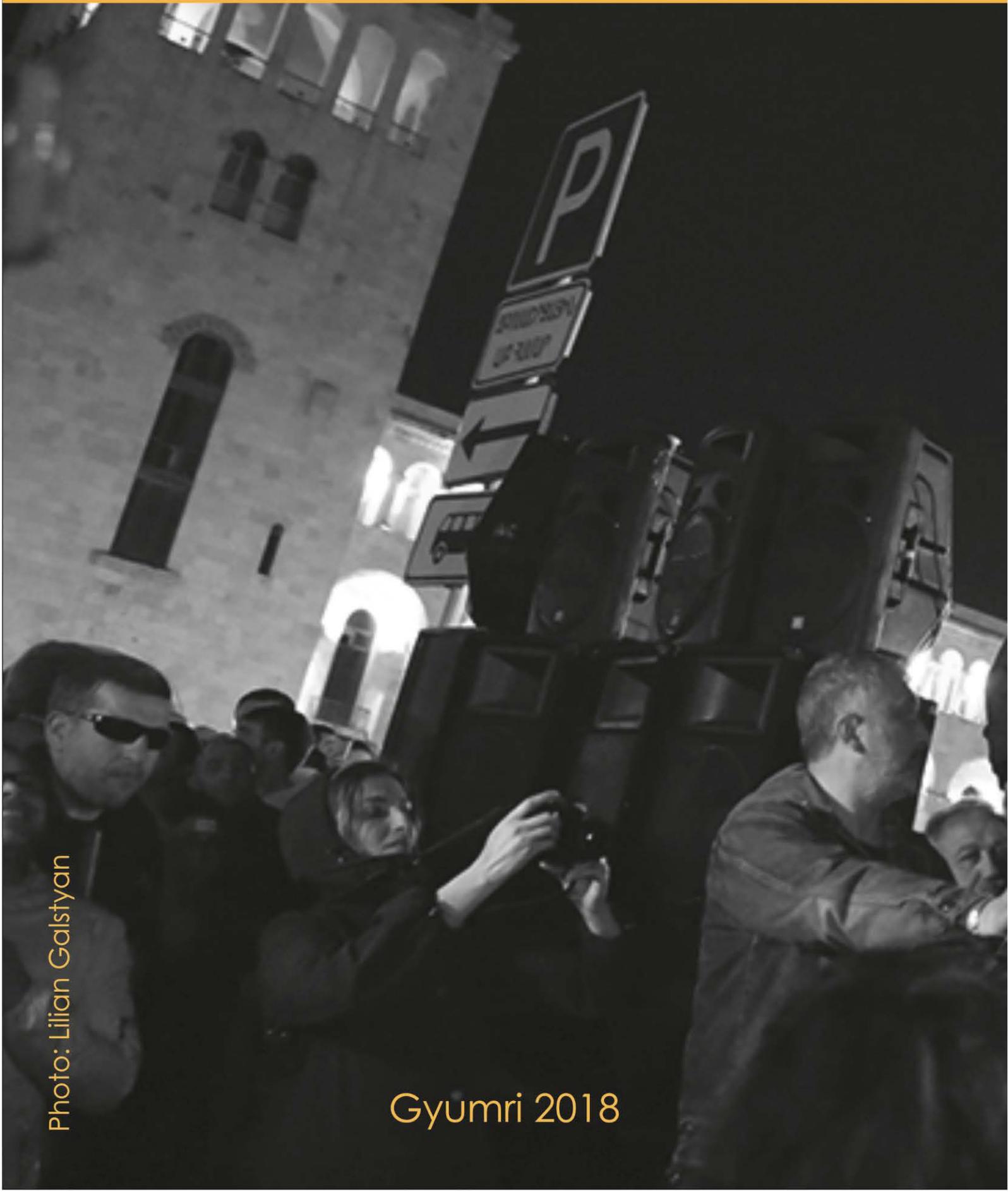


Photo: Lilian Galstyan

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