



# **INCLUSION OF PERSONS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN ELECTORAL PROCESS**

**Study Conducted By**

**POTOHAR MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
(PMHA)**

**Designing of the Report Supported By**



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**Zulqurnain Asghar**  
**Chief Executive**  
**PMHA**

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***This study is dedicated to all Persons Living with Disabilities of Pakistan***

## FOREWORD



**Amjad Nazeer**  
**Executive Director**  
**Institute of Development Research and Corresponding Capabilities**  
**IDRAK**

No democratic system can ever excel unless it is inclusive and pluralistic to all sections of society. Social justice ought to be the spirit of a democratic polity. Unfortunately, Pakistan still fails many a groups and communities in multiple spheres of life. Persons living with disability are one such community. Given their sizeable percentage, they constitute a significant fragment of our society. Like other human persons, they are blessed with tremendous potentials and capabilities to contribute in the growth and development of the country – but only if they are extended with equal opportunities without discrimination. Adequate legislation, institutionalized measures and emancipating them from stereotype responses can radically transform their lives.

Led by Zulqurnain Asghar, Potohar Mental Health Association (PMHA) is efficaciously striding in getting people and politicians realize the needs and priorities of the persons living with disabilities. Embedded scrupulously in the 'International Covenant on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities (IC-RPWD)' and also ratified by Pakistan, it is their inherent rights – be they social, economic or political - what they assert for. Apart from other arenas, the Association has done a commendable job in promoting the electoral and political rights of the persons living with disabilities. Beyond estimates and perceptions, it has painstakingly collected and meticulously analyzed information about the problems and facilities identified in the General and By-Elections 2018. The report admires what was available but, at the same time, critically voices their vital concerns where legislation and/or institutionalized or physical provisions were missing.

Post Elections Act 2017, it is the responsibility of NADRA and Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to efficiently provide them CNICs, register their

votes and ensure accessible and impairment-friendly polling booths for all categories of persons living with disabilities. Simultaneously, it is perennial responsibility of the candidates, representing any political party, to facilitate persons living with disabilities irrespective of the place, distance, class and gender. Ironically, most candidates are observed ignorant and ill-sensitive towards balloting rights of the persons living with disabilities and the notable difference their votes can make. Disappointingly enough, even the ECP personnel, polling staff and security officers all are found unaware of the special needs of the persons living with disabilities.

During elections, ECP staff should randomly visit urban, rural and far flung areas to assess the voting facilities of the persons living with disabilities and take immediate actions. Instead of introducing postal ballots, advanced politico-physical facilities be provided as the said facility further causes their exclusion. Compounded with gender related values and patriarchal notions, women living with disabilities are highly neglected and/or discouraged to actively take part in political processes, including their right to vote. Families happen to be the first institute to dispirit them under technical, social or security apprehensions. As a result, voting enthusiasm of a large number of PWDs is drenched low. As Local Government Elections are drawing to a close, ECP should design specific awareness and training campaigns to enable and empower persons living with disabilities for their expedient balloting.

Besides electoral and political barriers the report appropriately suggests means of their social, cultural and democratic inclusion. NGOs, like PMHA are, beyond doubt, not only advocating for appropriate policy and legislative measures but also providing techno-physical facilities too, to the people living with disabilities. It is through their contribution as well as improved education that numbers of people are increasingly acknowledging their political, economic and cultural rights.

Finally I would like to stress that the learning form 'disability impact assessment,' a government-led initiative, needs to be incorporated in all spheres of life. Desired facilities should be provided in schools, colleges, universities, dispensaries and hospitals with gender-sensitive lens. PWDs' 'employment and rehabilitation (amendment act) 2015' be implemented effectively and efficiently. Specific programmes should be designed to incorporate PWDs in all types of employments and businesses.

As indicated above and as suggested by the PMHA's report in hand, all such measures are essential to honour them as equal and equally dignified members of society.

## FOREWORD



**Marvi Sirmed**  
**Council Member**  
**Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP)**

If I have learnt anything from life, the essence of it is that the human spirit can never be rendered 'disabled' because of the enduring and relentless traits of perseverance, courage and interminable ability. How, then, some people with a bit different set of faculties could be conveniently called 'disable'? Prof. Stephen Hawking, himself inflicted with a lifelong physical disorder, repeatedly emphasized how the physical and physiological challenges must not blind humans of the ability of the human spirit.

In an ideal world, humans must behave as a collective, in a way that enables the humankind to achieve the optimum realization of human capability. When certain societies cannot do that, when they are not able to remove the barriers for the persons living with disabilities to realize their potential as well as to contribute to and participate in overall social, political and economic processes as equal shareholders, such a society should be rendered permanently disabled.

The report in your hands does this brilliant job of saving the society from getting permanently disabled! The author, a person living with disability himself, qualitatively analyses the barriers to the meaningful political participation of persons living with different abilities – I'm told that the technical term used for them is 'persons living with disabilities', the PWDs – in Pakistan, and makes some practical recommendations to be seriously looked at by not only the government but also the civil society, the media and the political parties.

Although I have been a modest part of human rights movements in Pakistan since last at least 25 years, it was not until 2016 that I was personally hit by the realization of how the state and the society have made it impossible for the PWDs to participate in even the basic social experiences, what to talk of

contributing to the political process. It was when my daughter underwent a major foot surgery that put her in wheel chair and crutches for greater part of next year. During that period, I realized that nothing is more dispiriting than seeing your loved ones being inflicted with what some call 'disability'. On the other end of the spectrum, nothing is more gratifying than seeing them demonstrating and proving how this perceived disability has no bearing on their capabilities to immensely contribute to the society.

That was the time when I decided at personal level that I would try my best to prevent this disability of our state and society. To my good luck, I got introduced to Mr. Zulqurnain Asghar and his wife – who has jointly authored this report – who have been extremely gracious in sharing their work and educating me about the various challenges and social barriers that persons living with disabilities face on daily basis. Not only that, Mr. Zulqurnain has worked really hard to produce purely research-based work, like for example this report, that shows a clear direction to the decision makers for removing these barriers.

I thank Mr. Zulqurnain Asghar, Ms. Farah Zulqurnain and their team for bringing this report, and congratulate them for this work. It is now upon the state, the civil society, and pretty much all of us to not let our country succumb to abject disability – the disability that prevents a nation to get its own Stephen Hawkings!

## Executive Summary

Despite many efforts to ensure that the persons living with disabilities cast their votes to the fullest, a lot still needs to be done. They still face severe difficulty in reaching to the polling sites, and then cast their votes with ease. Even the election staff and political party workers are not much sensitized on how to facilitate the persons living with disabilities on the polling days.

These are some of the broad findings of this study that observes the extent to which the persons living with disabilities exercised their right to vote during general elections 2018 and by-elections on the vacant seats. This study, it is hoped, will serve the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) which is presently reviewing its own performance in those elections, as it proceeds with conducting local government polls.

In July 2018, Pakistan successfully conducted its third successive transition to civilian rule. The polls were conducted under the framework of the Election Act, 2017, which was passed with consensus by all parties.

Despite all the controversies surrounding the polls results, the process was largely hailed as smooth. Not so much for the persons living with disabilities (PWDs). A range of infrastructural and attitudinal barriers hampered their full participation.

For the first time, persons living with disabilities were allowed the option to send their vote through postal ballot. It is not clear how many of them exercised this option, as many government functionaries were also allowed this option. In any case, this option is often criticized for excluding the persons living with disabilities from the mainstream.

Huge infrastructural barriers prevail across the country for persons living with disabilities, inhibiting them to vote properly. Polling stations and polling booths were largely not accessible for persons living with disabilities. For those who cannot hear, there were no signs, directions, instructions; and for those who cannot see, there was no alternative to paper ballot. Transportation was missing for persons living with disabilities in specific.

Security situation further imperiled the circumstances to vote, more so for women. In Balochistan provincial capital Quetta, the study found women were not allowed by their families to go and cast vote due to the volatile security situation.

The response from the polling staff was discouraging too. In their best attempt to facilitate the persons living with disabilities, the polling staff at the most exempted the persons living with disabilities from the queues, favoring them exercise their right to vote prior to others. This influences their free will to cast vote.

Other than election staff, even political parties' workers or those deputed on security of polling stations did not have sufficient information and knowledge to facilitate persons living with disabilities. In many cases, those without any personal escort were returned by political parties' agents from the polling stations which were inaccessible.

All in all, a large number of persons living with disabilities could not cast their vote mainly because absence of required staff, besides social pressures. Women living with disabilities were among the most neglected. They were subjected to gender-based discrimination and social stereotypes.

To be sure, non-governmental organizations encouraged the persons living with disabilities to play an active role in politics of the country. In Peshawar, where some of the polling stations located were partially accessible for persons living with disabilities, it was because of the efforts of civil society organizations that collaborated with ECP.

Civil society also initiated debates among people, to include persons living with disabilities. Otherwise, strikingly, even candidates running for national and provincial assembly were not much aware of the rights of persons living with disabilities under the Election Act 2017.

The study further reveals that there is great difference between those who take their own decisions and those whose decisions are influenced by their relatives. The former, or self-empowered ones, were socially active for the rights of persons living with disabilities, in interior Sindh, where they urged the NADRA teams to visit far flung villages/areas of Sindh. It was because of such efforts that the NADRA staff was sent to make special CNICs of persons living with disabilities through one window operation. It was, however, unfortunate that the respective authorities didn't pay any heed to the demand.

The study hopes that the ECP takes stock of its own performance which it is presently reviewing. It should come up with more awareness campaigns about the persons living with disabilities as the country is heading towards local bodies elections and it is imperative to address the concerns.

Meanwhile, political parties should encourage persons living with disabilities to hold the party offices. This will allow the voices of persons living with disabilities to reach the concerned quarters and will be having impact in policy making and intra-party decision making.

Now that new parliament is in place, the study recommends that legislation for persons living with disabilities and afterwards its proper implementation are the best suitable option for developing more inclusive society in our country.

## Recommendations

- In the light of challenges faced by persons living with disabilities in general and by- elections 2018, of temporary and permanent nature alike, the newly elected parliament must come up with further comprehensive legislation about persons living with disabilities to increase their participation in electoral process. Through appropriate legislation and allocation of resources and budget, this additional marginalized segment of the society would be given an opportunity to exercise their political rights on equal basis. Unless and until we have regulations we can't grow as a nation and the political and social exclusion of this segment of society will continue to grow. All electoral legislations and policies must be dynamic and responsive to the need of this segment of the population
- The government, through legislation, should make it compulsory upon the political parties to allocate seats for persons living with disabilities within the party offices so they will be able to contest on general and reserved seats. The mainstream political parties including those playing well at provincial level, should pay due respect and deliberations towards persons living with disabilities and must show their seriousness by developing "Disability Wings" and giving them equal opportunity to contest both on general and reserved quotas
- The political parties should also realize and must pay heed to persons living with disabilities by considering them as an integral portion of their vote bank; they should ensure necessary arrangements for persons living with disabilities in their intra-party elections and before general or local bodies' elections. The political parties should be allowed, constitutionally, to provide transportation to persons living with disabilities on polling day without influencing their voting option. This way they would be provided space needed for social/political inclusion

- Government should exempt the condition of Disability Certificate in all four provinces to acquire the special Computerized National Identity Card (SCNIC). Disability certificate is a layer of exclusion which hinders the registration of persons living with disabilities as a citizen / voter and it is against the concept of inclusive society. The processes of issuance of SCNIC should be brought under one roof or through one window operation at tehsil, taluqa and town level, to avoid the lengthy procedures
- There is a dire need of awareness campaigns to be launched by NADRA, ECP and civil society organizations about the registration of persons living with disabilities as an equal citizen and accessible Information, Education and Communication (IEC) material should be introduced to make the electoral process more inclusive which will enable them to exercise their political and electoral rights
- Distance of the polling stations should not be more than one kilometer radius from their homes. Political parties should provide transportation to persons living with disabilities regardless of their political affiliations
- Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should plug in Disability Sensitization Module in their training manuals before local bodies elections. The “Returning officers”, “Presiding Officers” and “Polling Staff” on the polling day must be well equipped with the relevant information regarding persons living with disabilities to ensure their right to vote. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should meet the accessibility standards while selecting buildings for polling stations. To make voting process accessible, ECP must introduce separate ballot boxes and alternate ballot papers on which signage and Braille embossed IEC material should be displayed as per need. This will not only enhance the level of trust in persons living with disabilities rather will also be helpful in getting more turnout on voting day. SMS service must be accessible for persons living with visual impairment

## Conceptualizing Disability in the Society of Pakistan

Disability has diversity in itself and every type of disability has different needs, therefore, it is important to cater their needs to include them in the political process. It is generally believed and argued that person living with disabilities faces immense discrimination in their day to day lives. This trend is more common in developing countries across the world where they live in extreme poverty. Since Pakistan is a developing country, its scenario is not different from the rest of the developing world. Mostly in developing world they have been denied of access to right to employment, right to vote, right to mobility and above all political right. In Pakistan, due to inaccessible infrastructure of the public and private spaces their right to mobility, political rights and right to vote have been denied. 80s was declared the decade of disability by UN which led to the government of Pakistan to issue the ordinance about persons living with disabilities. According to the disability ordinance 1981, *“disabled person refers to a person who, on account of injury, disease or congenital deformity, is handicapped for undertaking gainful profession or employment in order to earn his / her livelihood, and includes a person who is blind, deaf, physically handicapped or mentally retarded. Disease includes physical or mental condition arising from imperfect development of any organ”*.

*“In our society there are immense problems for persons living with disabilities and this has hindered me from practicing law notwithstanding the fact that I am a qualified lawyer possessing all necessary pre-requisite of the profession. The irony is, we have accessibility problems across the court premises including rooms and halls and despite knowing all the infrastructural/attitudinal barriers/problems no action has so far been initiated from past governments or from relevant quarters to this end. Since I am wheel chair user and instead of making fun of myself I preferred to stay at home”, revealed a female lawyer.*

With the passage of convention for people living with disabilities, “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” adopted in 2006 and enforced in 2008; a shift in approach towards the disability has been observed: from charity oriented

to medical-based/expert approach founded on rights based; in Pakistan among many other developing countries of the world. This convention has provided enough standards of protection including the social, economic, cultural, political and social rights and has urged upon their social/political inclusion of persons living with disabilities.

According to analysts the general population of persons living with disabilities in Pakistan counts around 15.04% of the population, yet on the other side of the picture is government estimates are 2.38% of the total population and as per current figures of census 2017, the population of persons living with disabilities is less than 1.48% of the total population. Many counts this figure to be under reported and that is mainly due to various political and social pressures and stigma attached to disability.

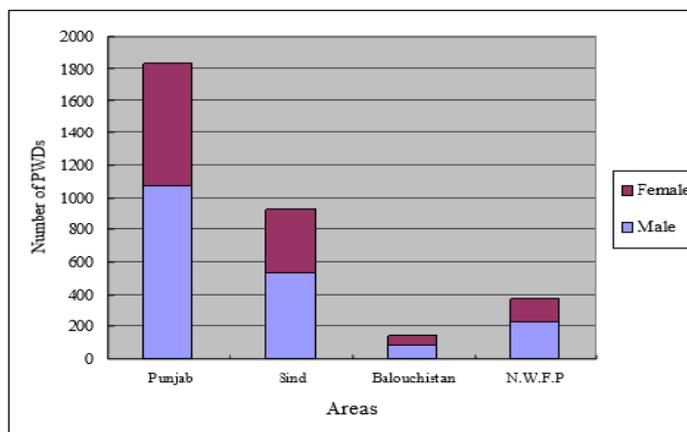
**Age-specific Data**

**Table 1: Age-specific data, 0-18, and 18 and above.**

	Physical Disability	Visual Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Mentally Disability	Overlapping
0-18 years old	2.82(million)	1.41	0.705	1.41	0.705
18 and above	2.402	1.201	0.6	1.201	0.6

**Area-specific Data**

**Figure 2: Area-specific data by gender**

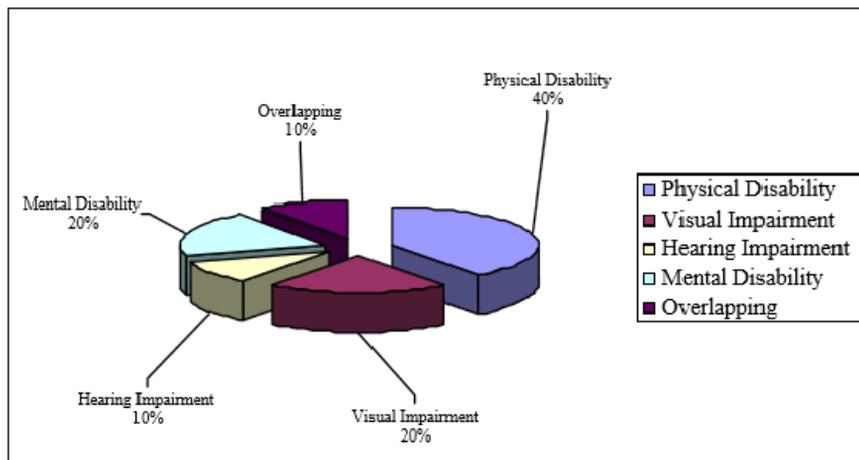


Source: Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare and Special Education, Pakistan Retrieved March 7, 2002 from <http://mowd.gov.pk/index.html>

In a conservative society like Pakistan, there is a general trend where a family tries to conceal the disability of their child / family member especially girl child/women if they have disabilities by birth. Such concealment led to the under registration of persons living with disabilities, and increases discrimination in many ways when it is related to the issues of marriages and other social bonds. It is generally feared in our society that such disabilities/ diseases could be transmitted genetically to next generation if one of your life partner has such history in his/her family. In Pakistan, persons living with disabilities are being considered as a burden upon the incumbent family, therefore, the misconceptions about the persons living with disabilities, misleading information about persons living with disabilities and myths about disabilities get started from home which led to the exclusion of persons living with disabilities from the political arena of Pakistan.

**Disability-specific Data**

**Figure 1: Disability-specific data**



Source: Oracle Research & Information Services. *Country Profile Study on Persons with Disabilities*

As cited above, with the advent of the convention for persons with disabilities in 2008, it was also felt by the law makers in Pakistan to propose new legislations for persons living with disabilities mainly based on “Rights Based Approach”.

Under such obligation an amendment “THE DISABLED PERSONS (EMPLOYMENT AND REHABILITATION) (AMENDMENT) ACT 2012 (XIII OF 2012)” was initiated in year 2012 that amended certain clauses in the ordinance enacted in 1981 to this end.

One step further was taken in the following years and a bill was proposed in National Assembly in 2015, initiated by few members of the national assembly that urged the federal government to immediately act for the rehabilitation and facilitation of all the persons living with disabilities in the country. The bill, however, could not see the light of the day and went into abeyance and is still pending. The bill went in detail about addition of many new sections into disability ordinance 1981. The insertion of new section 2A entails a large number of facilities that need to be provided to persons living with disabilities, for example, government will ensure employment quota of 2% for persons living with disabilities furthermore will take steps for fixing employment quota in proportionate with the society total number of persons living with disabilities in federal, provincial and district departments; 75% relief in tuition fees in public while 50% discounts in private institutions; reserved seats for persons living with disabilities in every stage of education; duty of federal government and NADRA to provide special computerized national identity cards (SCNIC) to persons living with disabilities at their door step; to provide 50% discount on air fares of PIA and Pakistan Railways besides public and private transportation companies; free treatments in government run medical facilities whereas 60% discount in private hospitals; 30% special discounts for persons living with disabilities at utility stores corporations; to provide wheel chairs for persons living with disabilities at public places; Bait-ul-Mall will have to pay 100,000 rupees to persons living with disabilities for marriage and up to 300,000 rupees interest free loans to persons living with disabilities; to increase quotas in federal and provincial public services commissions; special IT related (software and hardware) facilities for respective persons living with disabilities; full relief on vehicles imports for persons living

with disabilities and to turn permanent all those persons living with disabilities working in any government department on contract basis within three months after the commencement of this act. This bill however was short of paying special attention to the problems/issues of 'women living with disabilities either in public spaces or private spaces, political inclusion of persons living with disabilities in general, women living with disabilities specifically.

In June 2017, Balochistan Provincial Assembly enacted a bill an act "The Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, No II of 2017". According to the provincial secretariat the aim behind bringing this bill into act was *"to promote and ensure full and effective inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the community in line with the international best practices to protect their rights"*.

"Chapter 2" of the act has gone in quite details about the rights of persons living with disabilities. It has entailed the following rights with good details; Equality before law, right to privacy, women, children and elderly people living with disabilities, ease of access and mobility, protection from abusive, violent and intolerant behavior, equity in education, equity in employment, equity in health and rehabilitation services, right to live independently in community, right to accommodation, right to home and family, freedom of expression and information, right to political participation, access to justice, right to own property, participation in sports, cultural and recreational activities and protection of persons living with disabilities in risk and disaster situations. Importantly the act has revealed that no one is allowed to subject persons living with disabilities for research purposes without their prior consent and if he / she is conducting the said research, it should be based on decent methods including the sophisticated and advanced research methodologies and means. With this clause many people from the province claimed to have elevated their social stature in society.

## **Section 2: General Elections and By-Elections 2018: Challenges faced by Persons Living with Disabilities**

It is very encouraging that Election Commission of Pakistan has created gender and disability cell and gender and disability working group in 2018, which is comprised of NGOs those are working on gender, some DPOs those are working for persons living with physical impairment to increase participation of women and person living with disabilities in general election 2018. It is also a good sign that debate has been initiated about the political and electoral rights of persons living with disabilities. It was generally observed during the election 2018 that in some polling stations across the country, persons living with disabilities were treated respectfully by the election staff including those who were stationed on election security duty. Some persons living with disabilities who were interviewed during this study pointed out that this change in behavior and attitudes of polling staff could be attributed to different campaigns initiated through electronic and print media. Largely the civil society organizations were more active in promoting the message of treating the persons living with disabilities equally and respectfully and not to exclude them from the political / election process due to their disability. This message was somehow partially accepted by the society and provided certain space to this segment of the society. Beside this, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) also played a role in this respect too as it was observed in different areas where the interviewed responded in affirmative about the trainings and awareness of polling staff while noticing persons living with disabilities in queue. During the study there were pertinent problems that surfaced hindering the persons living with disabilities with access to polling stations. Civil documentation, problems in transportation (needed a ride or waited for an aid to provide ride), mobility problems, inaccessible polling stations, distance between their stations and homes, difficulties in postal balloting, need for basic assistance.

Voting has been considered as a fundamental right and a hallmark of democracies in the democratic governments across the globe. However, in emerging and developing countries like Pakistan persons living with disabilities faced numerous challenges including infrastructural, social / attitudinal and institutional barriers.

Considering the most common challenges during polling in general and by-elections 2018 remained inaccessibility of the political spaces, polling stations, catchment areas of polling stations, parking areas, walkways, entrance of buildings, interior lobbies where polling underwent and the voting area including the ballot boxes and exercising the vote through stamps. One major challenge that was observed during previous elections was the information about polling stations but this was successfully overcome by ECP this time. Although every voter was having access to certain SMS service; in response the software provided detailed descriptions about their respective polling stations but SMS service was in URDU which was not accessible for persons living with visual impairment.

## Registration of persons living with disabilities as a voter

Since persons living with disabilities are an integral portion of Pakistani society it has been felt by the respective government to issue them a national identity card that could be differentiated from a common one through a special logo. The purpose of special card, having the logo, is intended to provide certain rights, to bring in special attention and care towards them.

During the study it was found that to acquire the special national identity card is difficult and lengthy process for this segment of the population due to mobility constraints and lack of adequate / necessary information of the process. Also, persons living without disabilities are not entitled to prove themselves that they don't have any disability but persons living with disabilities needs to prove their disability through "Disability Certificate" to acquire special CNIC. This is one layer of exclusion of persons living with disabilities.

*Many respondents stated that government should abolish the concept of "Disability Certificate" for persons living with disabilities. This is against the essence of human rights and equality. "We are people with equal rights like others": If government is interested in facilitating us they should come up with the services such as health services, social security service and other relaxation such as transport fares digitally plug-in to Special National Identity Card. Disability certificate goes against the spirit of an inclusive society and inclusive Pakistan.*

The process of documentation to acquire special CNIC is lengthy which starts with a medical check-up conducted by a medical board at social welfare offices located in every district across the country. After issuance of "Disability Certificate" from the social welfare department, the candidate can then apply at NADRA offices for issuance of special NIC having logo of disability. Since NADRA can't issue or verify the nature of disability, they have to wait for this disability certificate which has been considered as a pre-requisite for getting the special CNIC.

Many respondents feel this process, due to its lengthy and hectic procedures, must be amended and should be brought under one roof or at least one-window operation at tehsil, taluqa and town level. Furthermore it was suggested that every month the authorities should announce certain date for persons living with disabilities to visit NADRA office where officials of medical board, social welfare department and NADRA are sitting in one room. This will reduce the level of hurdles for person living with disabilities that are most of the time dependent upon fellow colleagues and family members to complete this process.

*In far flung and comparatively backwards areas of the country, particularly in Balochistan and KP, many persons living with disabilities did not have the necessary information about acquiring special CNIC. Some argued that NADRA official did issued common identity cards to persons living with disabilities.*

Though the government had introduced Disabled persons' (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981 but the masses generally lacks necessary information about the ordinance which is very unfortunate. This dilemma is not only limited to general masses rather a large number of government officials do not know exactly the rights of person living with disabilities.

It was revealed during the study that families deny the right to civil documentation of persons living with disabilities mainly due to the attitudinal/social barriers. Many of the civil activists, in interior Sindh, suggested to NADRA to send their Mobile Registration Van (MRV) along with trained teams to villages where large number of persons living with disabilities are living without the special CNIC. However, the option was turned down by the respective authorities.

Villages in Balochistan province are located at sizable distance from the main markets besides having hurdles and transportation; persons living with disabilities opt to stay away from paying repeated visit to NADRA and hence fall short of getting the special CNIC. This difficulty increases manifolds when it comes to girls / women living with disabilities.

## Political participation of persons living with disabilities

Like many other countries exercising democracies, Pakistan also follows the suit and goes for general elections that come constitutionally after every five years subject to the continuation of the civilian democratic tradition. The society in general participates in such exercise with enthusiasm and fervor, but unfortunately those persons who are faced with and live with certain disabilities are almost excluded from political process. They are not only omitted from canvassing rather are subject to immense discrimination before, during and after the general elections.

*“I didn’t vote during this general election 2018 because I lost my interest in the process. I knew the politicians are least concern about us and neither have they studied their party’s manifestos that talks about persons living with disabilities nor are they interested”,* said one of the respondent during interview.

When the persons living with disabilities were contacted the response about their political participation was not that much encouraging. Few showed reluctance in casting their votes based on their ideological differences with contesting political parties; some remained short of casting their votes due to infrastructural barriers whereas others were debar by security threats.

Candidates running against the party tickets for National and Provincial Assemblies were totally ignorant about rights of persons living with disabilities and lacks basic information about the recently passed (Election Act 2017 and “Balochistan Disability Act 2017”)

Many persons living with disabilities participated in the political parties’ corner meetings in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but it has been observed that there were not special arrangements for people living with disabilities in attendance, neither the contesting candidates were interested in showing

concerns about persons living with disabilities nor the political workers showed any encouraging signs towards them.

In Balochistan majority of the political candidates lacked awareness about the importance of persons living with disabilities as a voter or as a community member. This could be one of the reasons that persons living with disabilities lives in the province under immense social, family customs and norms with stereotypes.

In Sindh, political parties resorted to corner meetings instead of huge rallies but it was noticed that in most of the cases these meeting areas were accessible for persons living with disabilities and the candidates, in general, showed good gestures towards persons living with disabilities.

*A few contesting candidates of a mainstream political party in interior Sindh shared that they have made concrete steps for persons living with disabilities in the previous governments and promised to continue their efforts whether they will be sitting on opposition benches or sitting on treasury benches.*

*One of the social activist, living with disability, said that before going to corner meetings of any party he used to study manifesto of that very party and when asked the candidate about policies related to persons living with disabilities they were simply blank about the subject. This showed their level of preparedness and seriousness over the issue.*

Persons living with disabilities, who were exercising postal ballot, faced immense hurdles in the process. The process was complained of excessive length and complications that makes it nearly impossible for persons living with disabilities to get involved in it.

Before the general election 2018 there was an initiative by civil society organization to impart Election Day trainings under “Election Day Observer “EDO” programs in Balochistan. The program was aimed to create awareness for

persons living with disabilities about the casting process and to encourage them to get involved in the process. Unfortunately the security issues came in the way of smooth functioning of the training program. The trainers revealed that security issues turned the situation altogether as it was not possible for them to participate with hovering security threats in the province.

*“Our families didn’t allow us to go and cast votes on election-day purely due to security reasons; for a wheel chair user it becomes almost impossible to escape a looming danger in crisis”,* said one of the female interviewer who was part of this program.

## Attitudinal and Social Barriers

Social and attitudinal barriers were immense in the way of participation of persons living with disabilities in general and by- elections 2018 and this could be attributed to the lack of general information among the masses about the elections and the right to vote.

Attitudinal barriers debar many of the persons living with disabilities during the polling day. In many cases since persons living with disabilities either needed a second person for assistance or required special transportation that was either busy or were simply unavailable because of the generally held stereotypes about them.

*Since our society haven't achieved literacy level of developed societies yet, it is very common to have such kind of discouraging statements and comments targeting persons living with disabilities in our daily lives. We must elevate, as a society, our awareness threshold.*

Generally in Balochistan and Punjab those persons living with disabilities who were willing to cast their votes were subject to immense pressure from their peers, colleagues and family members. They were subjected to generally discouraging remarks and comments which led to their exclusion from political process. For instance persons living with disabilities were told not to put themselves in trouble by approaching the polling stations located far away from their homes, *"What your vote will achieve that has not been achieved so far by those who are physically-able and healthy"* & *"your vote can't bring any sort of change in the national or local politics"*. Ironically such statements were observed across the country.

It was also revealed by many respondents that in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, political workers and supporters during rallies, discouraged

participation of persons living with disabilities due to their personal biases. When politicians were asked about the role of persons living with disabilities in their political party structure like disability wing for them or how they are addressing persons living with disabilities in decision making inside their party structure they were simply caught by surprise and subsequent anger taking such questions in lighter moments.

Normally challenges for persons living with disabilities are numerous but these challenges increases for women living with disabilities, who are otherwise also bound at their homes due to negative attitudes, stereotype roles/norms, traditional customs and gender biases prevailed specially in the tribal areas of the country. These challenges restricted many women living with disabilities to exercise their political rights.

Few female, social activists, living with disabilities were interviewed across the four provinces of the country and they were of the view as if they do not come up with their voice themselves, they won't be able to get the required space in legislations and in the political affairs of the country. However these women are hopeful that they will get the desired results despite the fact that the process is slow and much lengthy and the pathway is barbed with thorns.

*“Apparently, it seems difficult for women to get through the customs and norms of our culture and it becomes harder when the woman is living with certain disability. But we have to raise our voice on every forum like women living without disabilities are doing otherwise we will remained chained for lifelong”.*

## ECP approach towards persons living with disabilities

Prior to holding general elections 2018, the Election Commission of Pakistan did try to overcome one major hurdle of knowing about the voter registration and finding out the relevant polling station.

It is to say that they were successful in their efforts to some extent. But this service was of more importance and fruitfulness to citizens other than persons living with disabilities. The SMS service comprising of polling station and voter information was in Urdu and it was not possible for the installed software in mobile phones to read out for persons living with visual impairment. It was felt imperative that ECP should have similar kind of accessible SMS service in English language too.

The challenges for persons living with disabilities remained immense as a large number of polling stations were inaccessible.

In addition, at certain level there were few campaigns on social media that were creating awareness as how to accommodate and facilitate persons living with disabilities in general elections. Importantly such and many similar kind campaigns were launched, administered and run by civil society organizations instead of ECP.

*Election Commission of Pakistan did have trained their polling staff as how to include persons living with disabilities in electoral process, an elderly citizen waiting in queue or transgender. It was of similar importance, which was absent, for them to have launched awareness campaigns through different media outlets across the country to construct responsiveness among the masses towards the voting rights of persons living with disabilities.*

## Polling day challenges

Election Commission of Pakistan had claimed before the general elections 2018 of making it more accessible for persons living with disabilities; but they could not turn up to their words. It has been observed that no special care and attention had been paid by ECP and the concerned quarters towards making accessible polling stations for persons living with disabilities. In majority areas the polling stations were inaccessible. Mostly the polling was carried out in elevated floors, where voter have to go upstairs lacking the essential ramps for persons living with disabilities. Even those persons living with disabilities who were performing their duties on Election-Day were without the basic necessary arrangements.

Also the polling stations across the country were located in areas that were in faraway localities making it difficult for persons living with disabilities to approach. This was noted mostly in all provinces of Pakistan.

*Interestingly, according to one respondent from Peshawar who observed the polling processes herself, appraised the ECP for establishing polling booths on first floor of the buildings that were too approachable for persons living with disabilities but this was only found in Peshawar metropolitan.*

Presiding officers refused to answer queries like why polling stations were not accessible for persons living with disabilities. Almost in majority of the cases it was hard to observe that ECP have had accommodation of persons living with disabilities in their planning but in exceptional cases that might have happened coincidentally.

However variations were noted in attitudes of polling staff including security staff towards the persons living with disabilities from region to region. It could be because of lack of proper training and awareness regarding persons living with disabilities and their needs.

Even those families who were very supportive to their family members living with disabilities; refused to allow them to go and cast vote mainly because of the issue of law and order situation

*Choosing building is not our job. We are here from 8 to 6 only and that to for one day only. You should inquire about this issue from the department concern including Election Commission of Pakistan”, said a Returning Officer to question of a woman living with physical impairment.*

In areas of Balochistan, many ballot boxes and balloting stamp areas were not accessible for the wheel chairs users. However it was observed in Quetta that ECP had nominated resource persons in the polling booths to assist persons living with disabilities and were without the necessary support person, but this was a sole observation and can't be referred to all polling stations of the area.

### Section 3: Key findings of the study

- The election-day, ECP staffs were trained to facilitate persons living with disabilities to exercise their right to vote. However this process was of limited range; only restricted to exemption of persons living with disabilities from queues
- Women living with disabilities specifically in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan and generally in Punjab and Sindh were mostly excluded from the political and electoral process due to gender based discrimination, attitudinal and social barriers
- The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) surpassed the role of Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in creating awareness among masses about persons living with disabilities' right to vote. They, in addition, encouraged the persons living with disabilities to play an active role in political process of the country
- It was generally observed in Punjab that persons living with disabilities faced challenges to acquire adequate information about electoral process. Those who were having visual impairment found themselves clueless mostly as the available software's in computers and mobiles were unable to read out the Urdu messages besides graphic messages. In Lahore, mostly the range of cooperation of polling staff with persons living with disabilities was limited to taking them out of queues, ushering them to the presiding officer and other relevant desks, but, all related infrastructural and accessibility barriers were unaddressed like the rest of the country
- In Punjab, those who live with physical impairments faced more difficulties than those living with other types of disabilities in political processes and voting process. Furthermore the level of facilities provided, if any, varied from constituency to constituency. To be precise, it was not planned rather unplanned. It was revealed by one of respondent that in Muridke, district

of Punjab, out of around three hundred polling stations only three were accessible only for persons living with physical impairment

- Election Commission of Pakistan did displayed banners outside the polling stations aimed at promoting awareness in general population about the political rights of persons living with disabilities such as right to vote. Also, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Islamabad Capital Territory a pilot has been done by ECP through which 385 Braille / embossed posters were displayed in different polling stations
- Overall the general and by- elections 2018 were relatively improved in facilitating the persons living with disabilities as compared to previous elections. For example, in some areas, the height of ballot boxes was mostly accessible for wheel chair users. Same was the case with stamping the ballot but this was not the case across the country rather it was observed in very limited constituencies
- Some polling stations located inside Peshawar metropolitan were accessible for persons living with disabilities but this were not the case in outskirts of city and mountainous terrains
- With the improved level of education and awareness about persons living with disabilities among the educated masses of our society, a sense of rights based approach was observed generally. This was an encouraging sign and was absent in previous general elections 2013, by- elections and local bodies elections
- In all over the country, many respondents could not cast their votes due to location of their polling stations i-e., located at first, second floor and third floor. The staff on duty informed them not to go inside owing to rush and the location of polling booth
- Returning officers argued as how they can turn the polling stations accessible for persons living with disabilities as they are supposed to perform their duty starting from 8 am to 9 pm; for one day only, they can't

go furthermore. Such arguments reflects a lack of planning and realization as far as needs of persons living with disabilities are concerned

- Candidates for National and Provincial Assemblies were almost ignorant about the rights of persons living with disabilities and lacks basic information about the recently passed Election Act 2017and Disability Act Balochistan 2017
- Balochistan Assembly passed Disability Act 2017, furthering the process to make a council for its implementation, but no progress has been observed. The need is to think over the quick implementation of such bills backed by necessary political will and determination. Respondents from Balochistan province didn't have special CNIC because of lack of awareness and cumbersome process to acquire special CNIC. Due to absence of transportation to and from the NADRA offices owing to their far flung villages. It was not possible for persons living with disabilities to pay visits for making disability certificates and subsequently the special CNIC
- Unfortunately, NADRA had even issued common CNIC to persons living with disabilities, in Balochistan province, despite knowing the fact that they cannot acquire disability certificates as per law of the land. Persons living with disabilities, having not issued Special CNIC, couldn't cast their votes
- Offices of returning officers (ROs) and forms to apply as a candidate were not accessible for persons living with disabilities which led to their exclusion from the electoral process as a candidate
- In general elections 2018, only four (two male and two female) persons living with disabilities appeared as independent candidates as no political party issued party ticket to them that was clearly a violation of their parties' manifestoes
- Political candidates in Sindh showed good gestures towards persons living with disabilities attending their political corner meetings. In certain areas of Sindh they even conceded of not doing enough work for their betterment but vowed to enhance their efforts in this respect in future

- There is great potential in persons living with disabilities and they can do better than many persons living without disabilities. Unfortunately the society cold shoulder (attitudinal / social barriers) towards them is one of the main hurdles in putting them on back benches. Society need to utilize their skills in a constructive manner
- In Interior Sindh “Election Commission of Pakistan” was a bit successful in dealing with persons living with disabilities but this was restricted only to few steps. Many respondents in Sindh observed that no arrangements were made by Election Commission of Pakistan for persons living with disabilities such as ramps and other necessary arrangements like accessible wash rooms and seating arrangements for persons living with disabilities
- In interior Sindh many persons living with physical impairment refused to cast vote or even, in certain cases, visit the polling camps because of the generally held stereotypes and social / attitudinal barriers about persons living with disabilities among the masses
- Some of the respondents observed that the limited change in behaviors of the polling staff was appreciable but this was not due to homework done by Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), rather it was mainly due to the publicity/advertisement campaigns launched by civil society organizations through electronic and print media that created awareness among the masses to provide them space during the elections
- There is a difference between the socially empowered persons living with disabilities and non-empowered persons living with disabilities when it comes to peer and social pressures. The former feel easy in taking their decisions but the case varies in the latter where the social group including family members surrounding them exerts considerable influence in their decision making
- Respondents from interior Sindh urged the NADRA staff to visit those far flung villages/areas of Sindh where persons living with disabilities live in

large numbers. They requested to NADRA officials to send their Mobile Registration Vans (MRV) so as to make special CNIC of persons living with disabilities through one window operation. This way the respective turnout of persons living with disabilities will increase manifold besides allowing them to get the necessary special CNIC which otherwise will demand immense time and extra efforts

- Respondents from Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) observed that the attitude of political parties and candidates, in canvassing, towards persons living with disabilities was not encouraging. Either they neglected or adopted a very sympathetic approach towards them instead of adopting rights based approach
- They even didn't talk in detail about uplifting and bringing status of persons living with disabilities in par with other citizens of the country
- Inaccessibility factors with respect to persons living with disabilities were existing in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) surpassing the government attention and priorities. The polling stations lacked the basic needs required for facilitating the persons living with disabilities for instance unavailability of ramps on the sidelines of steps and non-availability of trained staff to facilitate those having visual impairment
- It had been observed through respondents that largely attitude of polling staff stationed in federal capital were not encouraging that much. The staff tried to pass-on tasks upon one another instead of taking the responsibility
- Generally, across the country, the polling staff was unaware about the right to vote of persons living with disabilities. Unless and if the person (voter) himself / herself was aware about their right to vote they had definitely to face hardships and difficulties
- In all four provinces of Pakistan, inaccessibility of polling stations was observed. Only 186 polling stations were accessible across the country for persons living with physical impairment that has debarred many persons living with disabilities from casting their votes

- It was also observed that the height of the stamping area of ballots was inaccessible for the wheelchair users. This area should have been taken into notice by the relevant authorities but unfortunately it went unaddressed

## Conclusion

The study is carried out to assess the glitches faced by persons living with disabilities during the general and by- elections 2018 which were held in accordance with 2017 election act, a coding to election act 2017 Election Commission of Pakistan make sure that every person living with disability can exercise his or her right to vote, without being judged. Study highlighted that persons living with disabilities faced three type of barriers across the country, infrastructural barriers: can be seen or visible; attitudinal/social barriers: invisible or can't be seen; and institutional barriers: absence of laws/policies to safeguards their fundamental rights. These barriers prevails across the country due to lack of political will at political parties' level and lack of necessary legislation at national level to include persons living with disabilities in the political and electoral process to ensure their electoral /political rights such as right to vote and right to participate in the political process as a leader/candidate in the democratic reality of Pakistan as an equal citizen of the state.

Pre-election barriers were clearly seen during the electoral processes of general elections 2018. In election rallies/political meetings persons living with disabilities were barred to participate due to inaccessible infrastructure. Websites of Election Commission of Pakistan and political parties were not accessible for persons living with visual impairment they were barred to necessary/relevant information as a citizen of the country. SMS service of Election Commission of Pakistan was also not accessible for individuals living with visual impairment which led to their exclusion from the voting process. Returning officers' offices were not accessible for individuals living with physical impairment. Due to inaccessible documentation related to applicants' form, persons living with disabilities faced hurdles to apply as a contender in general elections 2018, absence of persons living with disabilities in the executive council /central councils' of political parties as a leader, even they were excluded from membership campaign of the political parties by selecting inaccessible places for the membership camps, persons

living with disabilities are barred from the political campaign. No political party were nominated persons living with disabilities as their candidates during general elections 2018 which led to their exclusion from electoral process. Despite all the attitudinal and social barriers four (4) candidates were able to apply and contested as independent candidates that show their level of commitment and determination to contribute for the country.

Overall, only 186 polling stations were accessible for wheelchair users, in 385 polling stations Braille embossed posters were placed. Other than that, polling day barriers hinders persons living with disabilities to exercise their right to vote such as inaccessible polling stations and polling booths, inaccessible ballot papers for persons living with visual impairment, absence of signage in the polling stations and polling booths for persons living with hearing impairment, inaccessible places of ballot stamping for persons living with physical impairment, absence of ramps in polling stations, inaccessible doorways for persons living with physical impairment and absence of transportation for persons living with disabilities in general and women living with disabilities specifically.

It was very encouraging to see that Geo News initiated to include persons living with hearing impairment to interpret the results in sign language during live election transmission. There is a need that other channels should follow the trend.

The government, Election commission of Pakistan, civil society organizations and media should come up with more collective efforts to create awareness about political and electoral rights of persons living with disabilities to mainstream them as the country is heading towards local bodies elections and it is imperative to address the concerns and issues antagonized by persons living with disabilities in the country.

## **Annexure 1**

### **Introduction of PMHA**

Potohar Mental Health Association (PMHA) is a registered non government organization, working on mental health of persons living with disabilities including children, youth, adults (men and women).

PMHA is registered under the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies; Ordinance 1961 on September 12th 2002, registration number is VSWA328 ICT.

Our aim is to striving for a society that is well informed, educated, mentally healthy and progressive, in a way that it lives beyond differences and has acceptance for those who are differently able without any distinction of class, sex, color or creed and disability.

We endeavour to attain these goals through research projects and by playing an advisory role to motivate government to introduce better legislation for the betterment of the mental health and disability scenario in Pakistan specifically and over all society in general.

## Annexure 2

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