Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Call for Inputs: “Breaking the Glass Ceiling – Equal Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Political Life”

1. Introduction

Voices for Change Ireland is a volunteer-run, parent-led advocacy platform amplifying the voices of families of children, young people, and adults with disabilities across Ireland. Our work focuses on rights-based reform of disability and education systems, informed by lived experience, community engagement, and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
Through campaigns around the Assessment of Need, Section 16A of the Disability Act 2005, and Autism-Friendly Town initiatives, we have seen how systemic exclusion and inaccessible governance structures silence disabled people and their families from influencing decisions that profoundly shape their lives.

2. Context: The Political Participation Gap in Ireland

Despite Ireland’s ratification of the UNCRPD in 2018, persons with disabilities remain underrepresented in political and public life at all levels. Barriers include inaccessible consultation processes, policy-driven disempowerment, lack of accessible communication, and persistent cultural ableism. Disabled people and carers are rarely seen as experts or leaders in shaping the systems that affect them most.

3. Legal and Structural Restrictions

While Irish law does not explicitly prohibit disabled people from running for office, indirect barriers persist. Decision-making supports for those seeking office are non-existent. Accessibility standards for campaign venues, debates, and public appointments are voluntary rather than mandatory, and reasonable accommodations are not consistently provided in selection or interview processes.

4. Stigma and Attitudes

Public narratives often question whether persons with disabilities are “fit” for office. This stigma is reinforced by limited media representation and an absence of disabled role models in leadership. Neurodivergent and disabled advocates, particularly women, face online harassment and institutional dismissal when raising legitimate concerns or calling for accountability.

5. Barriers to Entering Public Life

Financial insecurity, inaccessible environments, lack of support during campaigning, and intersecting discrimination all limit participation. Disabled people and family carers often face penalties if they engage in political activity while receiving social welfare supports. Council chambers, voting stations, and political events are not always sensory-friendly or accessible.

6. Positive Practices and Promising Models

Community-led initiatives such as the Autism-Friendly Town model (including the Dublin 20 project) demonstrate inclusive approaches to participation. Parent-led advocacy networks and youth advisory structures, when resourced, show how accessible co-production can shape policy. However, these remain community-driven rather than state-supported and lack sustainable funding.

7. Recommendations

To realise Article 29 of the UNCRPD, Ireland and other States should:

- Enact legislation explicitly guaranteeing the right of persons with disabilities to stand for and hold office, with a statutory duty to provide reasonable accommodations.
- Include disability and neurodiversity representation targets in national and local politics.
- Embed Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs) in formal consultation and decision-making structures.
- Require political parties to make events and manifestos accessible (Easy-to-Read, plain language, sensory-friendly).
- Create public grants or mentorships to support disabled candidates.
- Reform social-protection systems to allow participation in political life without income loss.
- Launch awareness campaigns reframing disability from charity to leadership and expertise.

8. Illustrative Example – Disability Governance Gaps

The ongoing failure to implement Section 16A of the Disability Act 2005 illustrates the exclusion of disabled families from political accountability. Families must navigate opaque systems without redress, while agencies make binding decisions without oversight from those directly affected. This undermines democratic participation and equality before the law.

9. Conclusion

Breaking the glass ceiling of political participation requires dismantling visible and invisible barriers — from inaccessible systems to cultural ableism. Persons with disabilities and their families are not passive recipients of policy; they are experts by experience and essential contributors to an inclusive democracy. True participation means not only having a seat at the table but also the power to shape the agenda.

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This submission was prepared in response to the Call for Inputs by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: “Breaking the Glass Ceiling – Equal Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Political Life.”