

## Assistance for Persons with Disabilities at the polling station

The concept of “one person, one vote” is fundamental to democracy. The right to vote provides an opportunity for all people to influence decisions that affect their lives. However, persons with disabilities have often been discriminated against in this regard.

Participation of persons with disabilities in local government elections is a cornerstone for the realization of their rights as the members of a local community. For many citizens with disabilities it will be a relatively new opportunity and experience in democratic participation.

According to Pakistan’s Election Laws only person who is suffering from a mental disability and has been declared of unsound mind by a competent court cannot vote and be registered as voter. Such an individual shall be removed from the electoral roll with the proper documentation if he/she is already registered while all other persons with disabilities may vote. For this purpose they may acquire a special CNIC from NADRA with a disability logo. While the card bestows some benefits on the holder, it is not a requirement for voting. Persons with disabilities may vote using either a normal CNIC or the special CNIC.



Voting among people with disabilities can be discouraged by different obstacles and impediments. The main barriers encountered by persons with disabilities in the voting process include:

- Getting timely and correct information about the polling process
- Finding or getting to polling place
- Getting inside or using polling place (e.g., steps, no ramps, not enough space inside)
- Waiting in line
- Reading or seeing ballot
- Understanding how to vote
- Communicating with electoral officers

These impediments make voting more time-consuming and difficult, and may also discredit election officials by sending a wrong message that people with disabilities are not fully welcome in the electoral process.

On Election Day, in order to facilitate participation of persons with disabilities, election officers in line with instructions of the Election Commission of Pakistan, should ensure that the polling station is accessible for the persons with disabilities. Security personnel standing outside the polling station are obligated to assist a person with a physical disability while he/she is waiting to enter the polling station; the disabled voter may even go to the front of the queue.



Inside of the polling station, during the voting process, voters with disabilities have a right to ask for assistance. It refers to the visually impaired persons or those who have other physical disability because of which they cannot cast a ballot. The law allows voters with visual impairment or with any other

physical disability; that compromises their ability to mark the ballot paper; to receive assistance from a companion while casting his/her ballot. The assistant can be whoever the voter chooses so long as the assistant is not a candidate or a candidate's agent. Companion has to mark the ballot paper as directed by the voter only. Under no circumstances the companion should show anyone the voter's stamped ballot paper, to do so, is an election offence and she/he can be prosecuted. The staff of the polling station will write down the names and create a handwritten list of the persons with disabilities and companions who helped them to cast their vote.