

## **Participation of Individuals with Disabilities in Political Activities: Voices from Jordan**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study examines the participation of individuals with disabilities in political activities in Jordan: a topic on which there is little existing literature despite its capacity to promote successful social integration. Data for this study was gathered by conducting sixteen semi-structured interviews with individuals with disabilities and was then examined collectively using thematic analysis, in the context of related literature and medical and social models of disability. The resulting findings revealed that the most prevalent obstacles that people with disabilities encountered regarding participating in political activities were poor communication, their own negative attitudes towards politics and politicians, and inaccessible physical environments.

*Keywords:* Challenges, disabilities, individuals with disabilities, Jordan, political participation, social integration

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Comprehensive habilitation aims to integrate individuals with disabilities into all aspects of life, which includes making it feasible for them to take part in social and political activities that occur in the areas where they live and directly or indirectly affect their circumstances. However, although international and local organizations call for facilitating equal political participation

for individuals with disabilities, research reports the ongoing existence of numerous issues regarding accessibility. This is the case in Jordan, which, due to the influence of American policy, has become one of the most proactive Arab countries in terms of enacting laws to ensure the rights of individuals with disabilities (Hyassat, 2013; Rutherford, 2007; Sakarneh et al., 2019). The Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2017) by the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (HCRPD) sets out the right of individuals with disabilities to participate in all political events that are open to the public, including voting, attending political activities, taking part in political decision-making, and running for office. Article (44a) of this law has clearly stated “it is impermissible to deprive a person or restrict a person’s right to vote or to run as a candidate in parliamentary, municipal, trade union or any other general election on the basis of, or because of, disability” (Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017, p. 46). Despite these stipulations, however, individuals with disabilities living in Jordan rarely participate in political activities. It is therefore apparent that greater effort must be devoted to translating the principles of this legislation into actions that allow individuals with disabilities to fully engage with political aspects of daily and public life.

## Background

Jordan is a small Arabian country located in the heart of the Middle East with 10,554,000

residents (General Statistics Department, 2019). The political system in Jordan is a parliamentary monarchy, wherein the king is the head of state and has the power to appoint the prime minister while members of parliament are elected by citizens. Although there are 57 registered political parties in Jordan (Salameh, 2017), the level of public involvement in the political process is limited, as many Jordanians view these parties as failing to make relevant changes in government policy or lacking the necessary parliamentary representation to effect such change.

With regard to disability issues, Jordanian law (article 3a) defines an individual with a disability as

a person who has long term physical, sensory, intellectual, mental, psychological or neurological impairment, which, as a result of interaction with other physical and behavioral barriers, may hinder performance by such person of one of the major life activities or hinder the exercise by such person of any right or basic freedom independently (Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017, p. 6).

A study published by the HCRPD (2019) reported that 11 percent of Jordanian family units contain at least one individual with a disability. Most of those individuals receive services from many different institutions, including government ministries, the

HCRPD, and the private and voluntary sectors (Hyassat, 2016).

### **Medical and Social Models of Disability**

Before proceeding further, the medical and social models of disability must be discussed, as they inform how disabilities are perceived by individuals with disabilities and by others in their communities, and accordingly how disabilities influence the daily life of individuals who have them (Brett, 2002; Scullion, 2010). The medical model treats disability as a disease for which responsibility mainly lies with the individual; that is, individuals with disabilities are sick people whose problems and challenges are caused primarily by their disabilities, and who therefore must seek out treatment and/or cures in the form of medications or other suitable treatment offered by healthcare professionals (Brett, 2002; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Palmer & Harley, 2012; Smith et al., 2011). If they cannot resolve the issues created by their disabilities through taking these measures, they become alienated, neglected, excluded, and isolated in their communities (Brett, 2002; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Scullion, 2010).

In contrast, the social model of disability places the responsibility for dealing with disability-related issues upon society as a whole rather than upon the individual. According to this model, disability is socially constructed, meaning that the challenges that individuals with disabilities face – such as negative attitudes, discrimination, inequality, physical barriers,

marginalization, and oppression – are the result of society failing to remove obstacles that might hinder such individuals' full engagement in public and social life (McEwan & Butler, 2008; Sakarneh & Al-Swelmyeen, 2020; Scullion, 2010; Smith et al., 2011). Accordingly, the social model of disability mandates removing these organizational and attitudinal obstructions in order to allow individuals with disabilities equal access to sociopolitical opportunities and services.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Political participation has been defined as “processes of involvement, shared responsibility and active engagement in decisions which affect the quality of life” (Matthews et al., 1999, p. 136). It can also be encompassed by the concepts of political involvement, political action, political engagement, and political representation. Little is known about the participation of individuals with disabilities in these processes (Levesque, 2016); however, there is a broad consensus in the literature that the political participation of individuals with disabilities is much less than that of their non-disabled peers (Guldvik et al., 2013; Levesque, 2016; McCausland et al., 2018; Schur & Kruse, 2000; Schur et al., 2002; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). This low level of participation may result from limited ability and willingness to take part in political activities, as well as from not being invited to do so (Schur & Adya, 2013). Individuals with disabilities may view themselves as less capable of being engaged

in their local political affairs such as voting, joining a political party or organization, or running for office (Holland, 2016; Schur et al., 2003). Additionally, as noted in a study by Schur and Adya (2013), individuals with disabilities are more likely to be interested in their personal health care and financial matters than in political issues. This lack of political engagement is informed by suffering under social inequality and perceiving themselves as unable to have any noticeable effect on political processes (Levesque, 2016; Schur & Adya, 2013; Schur et al., 2003). Furthermore, elected public officials rarely solicit the views of individuals with disabilities (Harris et al., 2012). There are, however, exceptions to these phenomena, as in certain cases individuals with disabilities are motivated by their health conditions to participate in protests and connect with public officials (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2017). Similarly, a recent study conducted by Powell and Johnson (2019) found that individuals with disabilities exhibited greater interest in politics than individuals without disabilities, despite being less informed about political issues.

A growing body of research is investigating obstacles that may prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in political activities. For example, Holland (2016) argued that politics was essentially an inaccessible environment for individuals with disabilities:

The way politicians and political parties communicate is often

inaccessible for people with a learning disability. Language in parliament is complicated, full of jargon, driven by rhetoric and, in some cases, can be intended to mislead. Politicians interviewed on television/ radio often dodge direct questions and skillfully use phrases and language to respond in a way which can confuse even the most hardened of parliamentary followers (p. 11).

Although Holland's research was conducted within the context of the UK, these findings are applicable across a general global context. Indeed, inaccessible buildings, discriminations, negative attitudes, lack of transportation, and unemployment repeatedly appear in the existing literature as barriers to political participation among individuals with disabilities (Agran et al., 2015). For instance, to identify environmental challenges faced by individuals with disabilities regarding participation in political activities, Hammel et al. (2015) conducted qualitative research in eight American states. Participants in this study recounted facing a wide range of challenges including public policy, limited mobility, negative attitudes, built environments with poor accessibility, lack of access to usable technology, poor social support, inhospitable natural environments, and economic factors (Hammel et al., 2015). Hästbacka et al. (2016) set out similar findings in their review of the literature related to the societal participation, including

political participation, of individuals with disabilities in Europe; it must be noted, however, that their review only examined studies published between 2012 and 2013 in English. This literature review found that the main obstacles to political participation that European individuals with disabilities faced were negative public attitudes, economic factors, inaccessible environments, unemployment, health conditions, and welfare policies (Hästbacka et al., 2016).

Conversely, research has found that remedying the above obstacles may increase the likelihood of individuals with disabilities becoming involved in political activities. Individuals with disabilities who also have higher levels of education and household income, job satisfaction (Hästbacka et al., 2016; Schur et al., 2003), strong social networks (Mattila & Papageorgiou, 2017), and are in better health tend to participate more in political activities (Mattila et al., 2013). In addition, the availability and accessibility of technological tools seem to increase political participation for individuals with disabilities (Hammel et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2012). It is also important to note that political participation among individuals with disabilities varies with disability type (Suzanne et al., 2019). As limited cognitive abilities can hinder independent functioning, persons with intellectual disabilities appear to participate less in political activities, especially voting, than individuals with non-intellectual disabilities (Burden et al., 2017; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017), likely due to being unable to adequately interpret rules and instructions for how to do so (Agran & Hughes, 2013).

By and large, global political participation literature mainly focuses on voting turnout and related challenges, and mostly uses a quantitative approach to gather and analyze necessary data. In addition, most of the abovementioned studies were conducted in the United States of America and European countries, which rely on sociopolitical systems and structures that are very different from those in Jordan. To the best of our knowledge, the relative lack of political participation among Jordanian individuals with disabilities is an overlooked phenomenon; in short, the voices of these individuals are still not being heard. Thus, there is a need for research that addresses this issue within a specifically Jordanian cultural context. To that end, this study aims to answer the following questions: To what extent do individuals with disabilities participate in political activities in Jordan? And what do individuals with disabilities in Jordan perceive as barriers to participating in these activities?

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to generate an in-depth understanding of the participation of Jordanian individuals with disabilities in political activities and to explore the challenges hindering them from taking part in such activities. This study, therefore, used a qualitative approach to gather and analyze data, as qualitative research gives greater scope for participants to express themselves freely and openly regarding circumstances that relate to the phenomenon being investigated (Dawson, 2007; Willig, 2008).

More specifically, a qualitative approach can increase understanding of the real lives of individuals with disabilities (Sandall et al., 2002), which proved invaluable to the present study, particularly as the participants reported never having been formally asked before about their engagement in political activities. Furthermore, there is a dearth of qualitative research concerning the political participation of individuals with disabilities (McGrath et al., 2019).

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which are one of the most common instruments utilized in qualitative research (Dawson, 2007). The flexibility of this method allowed the authors to immediately engage with emergent interesting information and ask participants to expand on their answers while interviews were being conducted (Bryman, 2012).

### **Participants**

Fifteen men and women with disabilities were selected using a snowball sampling technique. To quote Bryman (2012, p. 424), snowball sampling is “a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research”. For this study, the process of recruiting research participants began with contacting friends who had relationships with or connections to individuals with disabilities. Those friends provided contact information for a total of

four individuals with disabilities, who were then phoned and given details regarding the aims and processes of the study. After these four individuals were interviewed, they referred the authors to other individuals with disabilities, who in turn referred them to others, and so on, until an adequate number of participants was reached (Noy, 2008). Throughout the sampling process, the authors strove to recruit individuals with different types of disabilities in order to give voice to a broader scope of experiences. Eventually, 23 individuals with disabilities were successfully contacted, 16 of whom agreed to take part in this study. The participants identified themselves as being visually impaired, hearing-impaired, or having other physical disabilities, and their ages ranged from 24 to 45. Regarding this last point, an effort was made to recruit participants over the age of 22 in order to ensure that at least one election had taken place between them reaching legal voting age in Jordan and the period when the study was conducted. Although their levels of education varied, all of them had at minimum completed secondary school; this aspect of the selection process was also deliberate, and was based on the assumption that a secondary school education was and is necessary for individuals to formulate and adequately express views on sociopolitical issues. Table 1 gives a brief demographic background on each participant. All names listed are pseudonyms and are used consistently throughout this paper.



Table 1  
*Participants' demographic data*

Nickname	Gender	Age	Qualification	Marital status	Disability
Ali	M	33	High school	Single	Physical
Arwa	F	24	High school	Single	Physical
Basma	F	26	Bachelor's degree	Married	Hearing
Eman	F	40	Secondary school	Divorced	Vision
Faten	F	37	Bachelor's degree	Single	Physical
Fatima	F	25	Secondary school	Single	Vision
Forat	M	45	High school	Married	Vision
Karima	F	36	Diploma	Married	Hearing
Lila	F	24	Bachelor's degree	Single	Hearing
Mohsen	M	44	Master	Married	Vision
Mona	F	40	Diploma	Married	Vision
Qais	M	22	Bachelor's degree	Single	Physical
Rami	M	33	Diploma	Single	Hearing
Ruba	F	36	Bachelor's degree	Married	Vision
Taher	M	29	Bachelor's degree	Single	Physical
Ward	M	42	High school	Married	Hearing

## Procedure

At the outset, participants received details concerning the aims of the research and the interview procedures, including the fact that each interview would be audio-recorded via smartphone to ensure accurate data collection. Participants were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary and they had the option to withdraw from the interview at any point. The interview procedure posed a significant challenge, partly because participants were unused to their voices being recorded. We clarified that all data would be kept anonymous and confidential according to ethical research guidelines (Bryman, 2012; Sakarneh et al., 2016), and that pseudonyms would be used when names were required. Further challenges arose from interview scheduling

and from encouraging participants to share their thoughts during interviews, as they seemed more at ease with closed-ended questions than with open-ended questions.

Once informed consent was obtained from all participants, four authors carried out the interviews individually. 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals with disabilities. Of these 16 interviews, 6 were conducted with individuals with vision-related disabilities, 5 were conducted with individuals with hearing disabilities, and 5 were conducted with individuals with physical disabilities (see Table 1). Interview times and settings were arranged based on each individual participant's preference. Additionally, an interpreter was employed for interviews with hearing-impaired participants.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by the research team and were subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis process included six phases: multiple readings of the transcripts, creating initial codes, finding potential themes from the collated codes, reviewing these themes, naming and clearly defining the themes, and writing up the findings. It should be noted that this process was recursive; the authors went back and forth between these phases as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two additional techniques were employed to ensure research validity. First, five participants were asked to read the full transcriptions of their interviews and comment on their accuracy (Bryman, 2012). All of them stated that they were satisfied with the transcriptions and did not request that anything be deleted, added or amended. Secondly, the coding process was examined by three researchers, independently of each other, who later met to discuss their initial codes before the coding list was reviewed by all authors (Barbour, 2001).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The codes generated from analyzing the interviews through the above processes were organized into two key themes. The first theme, 'Reluctance to participate', encompassed participants who perceived themselves as reluctant to take part in political activities. The second theme, 'Experiences of political participation', encompassed the challenges encountered

by those interviewees who did take part in political activities. Importantly, these themes overlap and connect in complex ways to give an in-depth understanding of political participation among individuals with disabilities in Jordan. The next sections discuss these themes in the context of the medical and social models of disability, and support the conclusions drawn using appropriate quotations from study participants' accounts and references to the relevant literature.

### Reluctance to Participate

Although the Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities sets out the right of all individuals in Jordan to participate in political activities (Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017), over one-third of our participants reported that they were reluctant to do so. Given that the medical model of disability is pervasive within Jordanian society (Hyassat, 2013), it was surprising that some participants did not attempt to engage in political activities. For example, Ali said: "I never joined a political party or even think about that. I also didn't go to the election station. You know, I don't have an ID. I didn't go to the Civil Status and Passport Department to get an ID". This reluctance to participate can be broken down into three interactive categories: narrow conceptions of what political participation entails, inattentiveness to politics, and a lack of trust in politicians (Figure 1).



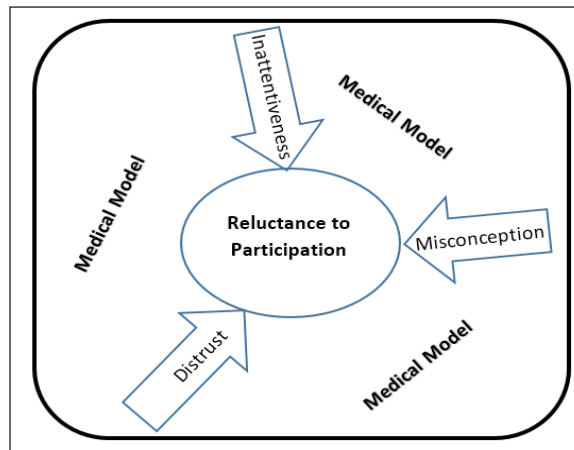


Figure 1. The main categories of the first emergent theme

### Conception of Political Participation

Although the term ‘political participation’ covers a wide range of political activities, the majority of participants in this study appeared to view it as revolving around voting in parliamentary elections. From their perspectives, political participation consisted solely of being registered to vote and/or taking part in the voting process. In Jordan, once a person reaches the age of 18, they are automatically registered to vote; the Civil Status and Passport Department is legally required to send his/her name to the Independent Election Commission (Independent Election Commission, 2016). As noted earlier in this paper, political participation can extend far beyond voting to include attending meetings, signing petitions, joining political demonstrations and protests, participating in social movements, and parliamentary representation (Goggin & Wadiwel, 2014; Mattila et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2016). However, the participants interviewed in this study did not mention any of these activities

when asked about political participation. For example, when Fatima was asked for her thoughts regarding her political rights, she only spoke about parliamentary elections:

*“I know that a person in my age bracket has the right to vote for a politician. I mean, at age 18, he or she is eligible to vote in the parliamentary elections. I am now 25 years old, so I know that I have the same right to vote for a candidate as any citizen here in Jordan.”*

Notably, the literature seems to share this view of what political participation entails, in that research from across the globe relating to the political participation of individuals with disabilities is mainly interested in voter turnout (e.g. Agran & Hughes, 2013; Agran et al., 2016; Burden et al., 2017; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Mattila et al., 2013; Schur & Adya, 2013; Schur et al., 2002; Suzanne et al., 2019). This

perhaps indicates that, even internationally, the concept of political participation has not yet expanded beyond voting and electoral processes.

### **Inattentiveness to Politics**

The literature has described individuals with disabilities as having no interest in politics, being unaware of political changes and movements, and being politically inactive (Reher, 2018; Schur & Adya, 2013; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). This was the case for most of the participants in this study, who described themselves as having no interest in and paying little attention to political activities. For instance, Forat said:

*“I’m completely not concerned with local political events nor international. I’ve got many other issues to care about such as my health, my work, caring for my kids, and saving food for my family. Do you think politics can help me to feed our family? My family affairs are rather important.”*

These interviewees’ disinterest in political participation may result from several factors, including not believing that engaging with politics can improve their circumstances (Mattila et al., 2017). They may also lack confidence in their ability to engage with political activities and make a difference in the political arena (Reher, 2018). Additionally, as in Forat’s case, they may devote their attention to more immediate issues, such as health care and

financial security (Mattila et al., 2017; Schur & Adya, 2013; Reher, 2018). However, it must be noted that our findings here are not consistent with Powell and Johnson’s (2019) study, which found that individuals with disabilities were more interested in politics than individuals without disabilities.

### **Lack of Trust in Politicians**

Another trend that emerged from the interviews conducted in this study was a lack of trust in politicians, whom all participants considered to be motivated purely by personal gain with little regard for the needs of the public. Some participants believed that politicians viewed them as a means of reaching their own goals; Mohsen, for instance, described a past encounter with a political candidate in these terms:

*“All of them are liars. They just want us when there is a general election... Three years ago, a candidate came to our home and met with my family. He gave several promises to uphold the disability issue and help us. You know, he doesn’t answer the phone now, or even reply to our messages. He forgot us when he reached to the parliament house. I’ll never vote again.”*

In a similar vein, Karima stated that it was futile to expect politicians or public officials to uphold her right to access equal opportunities:

*“Candidly, I don’t think we need to vote or getting involved in political activities. You know why? Because none of them can help. What did they do for me when I was looking for an appropriate job? I struggled to have a health insurance card. Did any politician provide help? Not at all. I can say that even the ministers are not supported; they can’t help, they are insufficient.”*

These findings echo previous research wherein individuals with disabilities often do not trust government officials or political figures (Schur & Adya, 2013), and conversely, individuals with good health tend to trust their own political systems than individuals in poor health (Mattila, 2019). Reher (2018, p. 617) ascribed such distrust to the latter group’s “negative direct experiences with public institutions”; that is, “people with disabilities are more likely to require public services, including healthcare, while at the same time experiencing more problems accessing them”. Distrust of politics may also result from the perception that politicians are not interested in the opinions or view of individuals with disabilities (Harris et al., 2012).

Based on the accounts of this study’s participants, the overall perception of disability in Jordan appears to draw mainly on the medical model, leading to the study participants internalizing negative public perspectives of disability and seeing themselves as inadequate members of society, unable to function in their daily

tasks and even less able to engage in political activities. Such a view is, in the words of Haegele and Hodge (2016, p. 195), “strongly normative, meaning people are considered disabled on the basis that they are unable to function as a so-called normal person does”. Perceiving themselves through such a negative lens may generate reluctance among individuals with disabilities, including those who took part in this study, to participate in political activities in Jordan.

### **Experiences of Political Participation**

Approximately two-thirds of the participants in this study reported having taken part in political activities, albeit on a very limited scale; in fact, their accounts primarily dealt with traveling to polling stations to vote. They seemed unhappy with having engaged in these experiences due to the challenges they faced, which included poor communication, negative attitudes, and inaccessible physical environments (Figure 2). Moreover, these study participants shared similar views on politicians and political activities to the more reluctant participants discussed earlier, expressing a general distrust of politicians and a lack of interest in taking part in further political activities.

The restrictions that these participants encountered point toward the relative unpopularity of the social model of disability in Jordan. If the social model gains more prominence, it could lead to the removal of such restrictions and, subsequently, increased political participation among

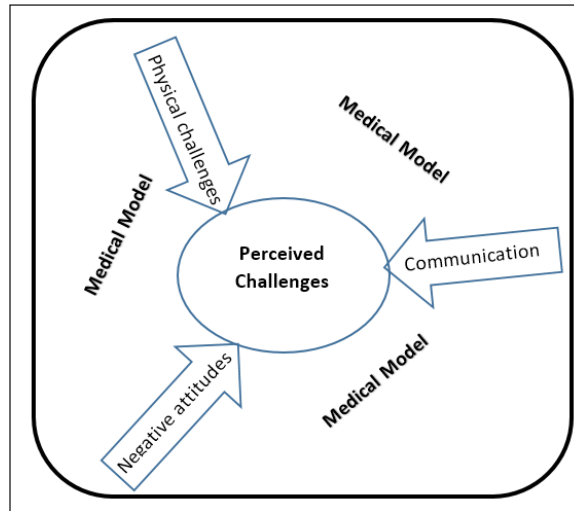


Figure 2. The main categories of the second emergent theme

Jordanian individuals with disabilities (Goering, 2015; Palmer & Harley, 2012).

### Communication

One of the main challenges to political participation that our interviewees faced was a lack of clear, accessible methods of communication. Individuals with hearing impairments mentioned the absence of interpreters in polling stations or at other political events, while individuals with visual impairments reported difficulties with polling station staff – all of which made it difficult for them to obtain and process necessary information and take part in political activities (Reher, 2018). Some interviewees with visual impairments reported feeling humiliated when voting, as ballot sheets were not made accessible in Braille or large print. They had to seek assistance from polling station staff, who did not have the training or skills to aid individuals with disabilities in exercising

their right to vote. Ruba shared such an experience when recounting her participation in Jordan's last parliamentary election:

*“In 2016, I got into the school (polling station) to cast my vote. I went with my brother. When I attempted to enter the polling room, the staff there did not let my brother to come in with me. They told us it wasn't allowed. They were rude; they did not understand my needs. How on earth could they do that while there were no facilities available for me, like a Braille instruction sheet? One of the staff members insisted on writing on my behalf. It was an embarrassing day. They breached my privacy. I did not want anyone to see my choice.”*

This lack of adequate communication facilities was likely due to the absence of relevant legislation at the time of the last

general election in which study participants voted. Legislation of approved in 2017, Article 44(b) mandated that voting stations provide “reasonable accommodation and accessibility, including in voting centers and the provision of sign language interpreters, and to enable persons with disabilities to vote through their escorts” (Jordanian Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2017, p. 46). However, the last parliamentary election before interviews took place was in 2016, one year before this legislation went into effect.

The absence of communication facilities for individuals with disabilities was not limited to the voting process. Another study participant, Rami, recalled attending a lecture on the Arab–Israeli conflict and feeling alienated because he had no way to understand what the speaker was saying:

*“There were many people in the [lecture] hall. While the speaker was talking, I did not know what was going on. I could not understand what was being said. There was no sign interpreter. I felt like I didn’t belong with those people in the hall. It was not an appropriate place for me to stay in. I left the hall.”*

Based on the literature, similar communication barriers hinder the political participation of individuals with disabilities throughout the world, from the U.S. (Schur et al., 2013), to the U.K. (James et al., 2018), to Ghana (Sackey, 2015), and to Cameroon (Opoku et al., 2016). In fact, Goggin and

Wadiwel (2014) suggested that improving communication facilities was central to boosting political participation among individuals with disabilities. For individuals with hearing impairment, for example, providing sign language translators at events can be instrumental to facilitate their understanding of and engagement with all aspects of the political process. In other cases and for individuals with other disabilities, technological devices can be used to overcome communicational challenges and ultimately increase participation in political activities (Hammel et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2012). However, given how the interviewees in the present study described their communication or lack thereof when engaging in political activities, the medical perspective of disability appears to still be highly influential in Jordan (Hyassat, 2013).

### **Negative Attitudes**

Without exception, all participants in this study reported facing negative attitudes from others when engaging in, or even thinking about engaging in, political activities. These attitudes, which included discrimination, stereotypes, stigma, disgrace, and neglect, discouraged them from wishing to pursue political participation in the future. Eman’s account below illustrates the effect and prevalence of such attitudes. When asked if she had ever considered running for political office, she answered:

*“Are you kidding me! Please be realistic. Do you think people will vote for a disabled person? I do*

*not think so. People believe that we are not reliable, we have no power to defend their rights... We have several political parties here in Jordan. Have you ever heard of a person with disabilities in a high position in these parties?"*

Negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities are one of the chief shortcomings of the medical model (Scullion, 2010; Smith et al., 2011). The structure of this model of disability may lead other people to view individuals with disabilities as less capable of participating in daily life due to having medical conditions (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Palmer & Harley, 2012). In this study, participants likely internalized these attitudes and thus perceived themselves as incapable of political participation as a result. Moreover, Eman and other participants' accounts raise the issue of an absence of role models; at the time of writing, no individual with disabilities holds or has held a high-status political position in Jordan, which further fuels the negative attitudes that study participants hold about their own ability to take part in political activities.

### **Environmental Challenges**

As alluded to in Ruba's account earlier, polling stations in Jordan are placed in government schools. Most of these were built before the establishment of Jordan's National Building Codes, which sets out requirements for buildings to be made accessible for individuals with

disabilities. Similar conditions apply to most political parties' headquarters in Jordan, which were also mostly built prior to the National Building Codes coming into effect. Therefore, the participants in our study who attempted to involve themselves in political activities found the physical environments relating to these activities very difficult to navigate. The main challenges encountered in this respect were a lack of access to appropriate transportation and buildings that were not constructed to accommodate physical disabilities. The latter proved especially daunting for study participants with physical disabilities other than hearing or vision impairments, who in their interviews discussed unusable building entrances, absence of ramps, doors that were difficult to open, and a lack of spaces for vehicles or parking. These issues arose in relation to several different kinds of political activities, including voting. For example, Faten recalled feeling quite embarrassed when she went with her cousin to vote in Jordan's parliamentary election:

*"To be honest, I do not like to remember that experience. When we arrived at the school, we struggled to find a place to park where we could unload the wheelchair from the car boot. It was crowded there. The problem was that the room where I needed to go to vote was upstairs while the school had no lift. I mean, the polling station was on the second floor. Do you know what happened? It was shameful. There were guys around who carried me*



*in my wheelchair to the room up there.”*

Since the social model of disability holds that individuals with disabilities are excluded from society by social and environmental barriers (Radermacher et al., 2010), the existence of physical challenges in our participants' communities can be viewed as further evidence of the dominance of the medical model of disability in Jordan (McEwan & Butler, 2008; Scullion, 2010). In the medical model, individuals with disabilities are responsible for adapting to social and physical environments; if they fail to do so, their participation in the activities that take place in these environments is not prioritized (Brett, 2002; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Scullion, 2010). The findings of our study reflect the prevalence of these negative perceptions and assumptions concerning the political participation of individuals with disabilities in Jordan, whose accounts suggest that they are devalued and marginalized by their communities.

Further, our findings reveal that the challenges resulting from such perceptions and attitudes discouraged the participants in our study from taking part in any future political activities. As one participant, Arwa, said: “Our dignity is more important than an election, so no further participation.” In addition, although most of the literature discussing the obstacles to political participation faced by individuals with disabilities relies on quantitative design, the findings of our qualitative study correspond with the obstacles found in these quantitative

studies (Bricout & Gray, 2006; Hall & Alvarez, 2012; Hästbacka et al., 2016; Radermacher et al., 2010; Sackey, 2015).

## CONCLUSION

This paper examines barriers to and the depth of political engagement of individuals with disabilities living in Jordan. The findings presented here show that in the Jordanian context, individuals with disabilities are largely non-participants in political activities due to complex attitudinal and physical barriers. These arise from negative views of individuals with disabilities, distrust of politicians, and a lack of appropriate accommodations and communication technologies in political spaces and activities.

This study also reveals a gap between current Jordanian legislation concerning the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate in political activities and the extent to which they are able to exercise these rights in practice. Such findings point toward the necessity of fully implementing the principles of current disability and equality legislation in Jordan, as well as increasing public awareness of disability issues. Doing so will contribute to more fully integrating Jordanian individuals with disabilities into political participation and into public life as a whole.

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