

## Women with Disability and Voting Rights in the Northern Region of Ghana

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### ABSTRACT

The participation of persons with disability in civic processes has been acknowledged as an effective mechanism for attaining inclusive citizenship, yet the dynamics that characterise such processes are believed to be the quintessential male sphere of action, one in which women are both unwelcome and ineffective. This study sought to assess the awareness level of women with disability regarding their right to vote and gendered systems in place to facilitate the exercise of such a right. A case study research design was employed within a mixed research methodological approach, consisting of interviews with 48 women from diverse disability groups. The study established that a high level of civic awareness and interest in voting existed among women with disabilities, precipitated largely by peers and local associations of persons with disability. However, no specific provisions for women with disability during voting were found, as national electoral officers perceive women and men to have similar needs. It is recommended that institutions responsible for elections deepen their engagement with the associations of persons with disability and polling centres more accessible in order to sustain the participation of women with disability in civic activities.

**Key words:** Disability, Voting, Women's Wings, Tactile, Polling

### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive citizenship is grounded in the participation of everyone in the political, social, economic and cultural facets of society. Inclusivity, which comprises all the processes and actions that create equal opportunities and resources for the active participation of all in electoral processes, is the harbinger of their citizenship (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2022; Amir & Kpador, 2019; Aldersey *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the right to vote and be voted for is an exercise that contributes to the inclusion of all and leaves no one behind. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees the right to vote to every citizen regardless of their background. In Ghana the right to vote is guaranteed under various constitutions to all citizens 18 years and above who are of sound mind (Republic of Ghana, 2016).

In spite of voting as a right, a fissure exists between women and men and this is largely due to a range of mediating issues including gender norms, location and ability. In the view of Sossou (2012), the dynamics that often characterise electoral spaces are believed to be the quintessential male sphere of action, one in which women are both unwelcome and ineffective.

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Persistent patriarchal systems and associated socio-cultural norms continue to limit the influence of women in civic participation to an extent that women occupy only 26 per cent of national parliamentary seats globally. Regionally, women occupy only 30 per cent, 21.6 per cent and 14.5 per cent of parliamentary seats in Europe and America, Africa and Ghana respectively. Similar trends can be noted in local governance as women constitute averagely, 36 per cent of elected members in local deliberative bodies (Rome, 2022; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021; Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme, 2022 & 2021).

Even though women generally are under-represented, women with disability are far more excluded in most electoral processes due to statutory and procedural barriers and also a triple burden of gender, disability, and having to function in a patriarchal context (International Foundation for Electoral Systems and National Democratic Institute, 2014). Existing legal and institutional frameworks and electoral systems remain discriminatory while positive rhetoric, unsupported by political action, acts to exclude women with disability from exercising their full civic right (Disabled World, 2022; McCarthy, 2020; Sackey, 2015). In Ghana, the Persons with Disability Act mandates inclusive participation for persons with disability in the country's governance processes, but it has contributed very little to the share and influence of women with disability due to the absence of guidelines for their actual engagement (Enyaawah, 2017; Asante & Sasu, 2015 and Government of Ghana, 2006). Also, time, poverty due to childcare and other productive and reproductive requirements remain barriers while exclusive electoral procedures such as finger-print biometric and face only identification can lead to low demand by women with disability due to fear of stigma or lack of appreciation of the importance (World Bank, 2020). And while a number of studies have examined the participation of persons with disability in the electoral processes generally, few have investigated the exercise of voting as a right among women with disability in Ghana, and bottlenecks that need to be overcome in the realisation of this right. The objective of the study was therefore to assess the awareness level of women with disability regarding voting and gendered systems in place for realising their right to vote.

### **Theoretical Framework**

From a human rights-based approach, disability is viewed from the social model where the nature and depth of what constitutes a disability is a function of existing barriers (Wom, in Enyaawah, 2017). Guzman *et al.* (2021) present political participation, barriers, electoral practices and electoral-assistive devices as key notions for understanding the right of persons with disability to vote. These notions imply enabling the participation of everyone in the political process, either in presenting oneself to be voted for or voting to elect other implies justice, recognition, self-determination and solidarity.

Laws, physical and or environmental barriers, discriminatory practices, either overtly or covertly, are believed to significantly exclude persons with disability in the voting process. Conversely, targeted voter education, the engagement of persons with disabilities as election observers, technology driven assistive devices, polling centres' accessibility and training of election officials in disability issues are considered promising best practices for including women with disability (EAC-NIST, 2016). The elimination of barriers, the promotion of best practices and the enhancement of capabilities to participate in, and the exercise of the right to vote are paramount.

The Constitution of Ghana and the Persons with Disability Act of Ghana (Act 715) (Republic of Ghana, 2006 and Republic of Ghana, 1993) represent the key legislative frameworks within which the civic rights of women with disability are to be realised. Even though in its entirety the Act 715 has no explicit provisions on gender, there is an anticipation that the implementation of specific actions that respond to the special needs and challenges of

persons with disability are expected to benefit women with disability. The Constitutional Instrument CI (5) of the Public Elections Regulations Act of 2016 (Republic of Ghana (2016) provides for the assistance of persons with disability during voting. Systemically, the Electoral Commission has established a Gender and Disability Desk with the mandate to coordinate the participation of women and persons with disability in local and national level elections. How women with disability in Ghana exercise their right to vote is therefore an outcome of their readiness, in terms of awareness and willingness to participate as well as the legislations and strategies for promoting civic participation.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted in the Northern Region of Ghana. As a context that was characterised by varied initiatives all seeking to increase the economic, social and political participation of women, situating the study in the Northern Region was to augment perspectives regarding the civic experiences of women with disability. According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, there were 2,310,939 people in the region and 1,169,234 were females (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Also, 56,671 females were considered as having a disability. At 44.3per cent, the region had the lowest female literacy rate in the country. At the time of the 2020 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, there were 18 electoral constituencies with 1,631,580 registered voters. Nearly 3.0per cent of the females of voting age were classified as having a disability (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

The study employed a descriptive case study design as this facilitated an in-depth exploration of the dimensions of the study and a framework for assessing the processes and the experiences of women with disability. The enabling character of case study design in the collection of detailed information through a variety of data collection procedures over a defined period of time suited the study (Creswell, 2009). Women with disabilities who were 18 years and above and registered voters were the target. The study employed ‘*difficulty in performing an activity*’ in the determination of disability and given that the exact number of eligible voters who were women with disability was unknown, the focus was on only members of existing *Women’s Wings* of the Associations and Alliances of Persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind, physically disabled, who have albinism and those with multiple disabilities.

The study employed non-probability sampling techniques in selecting 48 respondents. In the first instance, the presidents, secretaries and three other core executive members of the *Women’s Wings* of the associations of persons with disability were purposively selected. These constituted 30per cent and their inclusion was due to their mandate as mobilisers of other women with disability for associations’ activities including civic events. Thence, the executive members provided guidance in reaching other respondents. The Metropolitan and Regional Directors of the Electoral Commission of Ghana were included as key informants.

The qualitative data comprised respondents’ knowledge and views regarding the processes involved and their voting experiences with an emphasis on the 2020 Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Their awareness, mechanisms in place and their influence on the inclusion of women with disabilities in voting represented the rest of the qualitative data. The only quantitative data included the demographic and bio data of respondents.

Data was collected through a questionnaire and an interview guide. These tools contained key questions, adopted from the *Washington Group Short Set on Functioning* (WG-SS). The interview guide contained a brief but specific list of issues that facilitated an in-depth inquiry. The questionnaire was deployed via google forms to the mobile phones of respondents who were capable of responding through such medium and who had earlier supplied their contact numbers with prior consent. Data from respondents that lacked or were unfamiliar with mobile phones and also the key informants was obtained through face-to-face interviews. The qualitative data were analysed and presented through key themes and establishment of

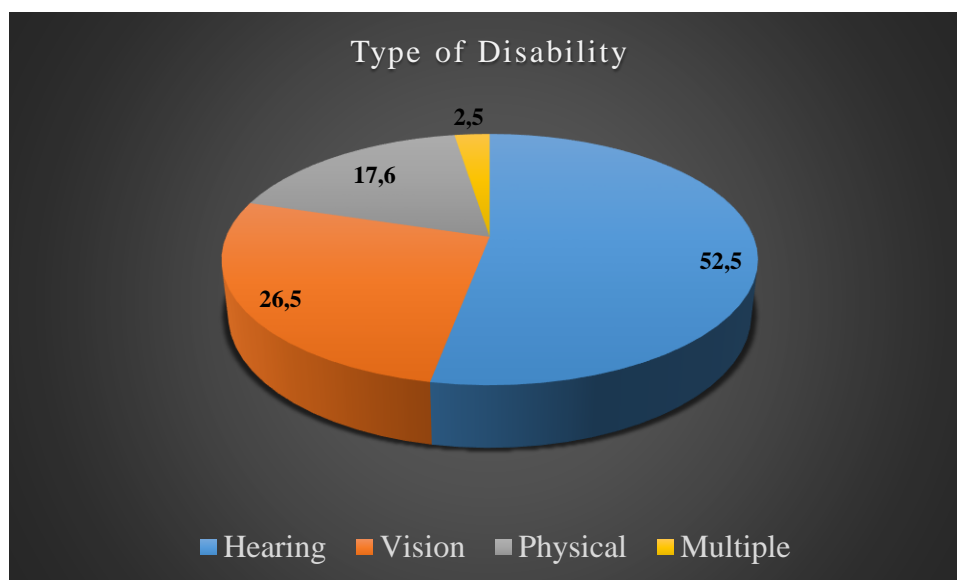
relationships among the themes as they applied to the study objectives. The analysis of the quantitative data was done in the form of percentages and charts.

Ethical considerations involved informed consent. The entire process of the study was also guided by the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (2021) and the *Report 3F* of the 2021 Population and Housing Census (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021) as these provide some ethical considerations when dealing with persons with disability. Content and face validity of the data collection tools were achieved through expert judgment while, for purposes of confidentiality, the researchers employed alpha-numeric codes in instances where reference was made to specific respondents or locations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demographic Data

Majority of the respondents (68.0per cent) were aged 25 to 30 years, which is an indication that most of them were in their youthful ages. About 73.0per cent of them resided in or around the Metropolitan district of Tamale with a few from neighbouring districts notably Savelugu, Yendi and Karaga.



**Figure 1: Types of disability**

As depicted in Figure 1, 52.9per cent had hearing impairment while 26.5per cent and 17.6per cent had vision and physical disabilities respectively. The comparatively youthful age of the respondents with its associated energy and exuberance coupled with their level of education could be major preconditions for their understanding and civic participation. At the same time, irrespective of their disability, time poverty due largely to family and reproductive responsibilities can affect their civic roles since the voting processes in Ghana often involve a lot of time.

### Knowledge and Awareness of the Right to Vote

It was revealed that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (90.1per cent) were aware of voting and identified local and national level elections as a key civic duty. During the face-to-face interviews, majority of them exhibited great interest in voting and confirmed that they voted in the most recent presidential and parliamentary elections which took place in 2020.

Also, 85.3 per cent of respondents indicated their willingness to vote in the next national elections. On the motivation to vote however, 78.0 per cent of the respondents indicated that their motivation to vote is due to the understanding that it is a responsibility that must be fulfilled. Providing details one respondent said *‘I learned that it is good to vote because as Ghanaians, and at this age, it is your responsibility. If you do not vote it means you are not a responsible citizen and that is not good. Once you are told to do so and you know it is a duty, why not? And for me, since I do not pay anything before voting I try my best to do it’*.

Nearly all respondents knew the location of their polling centres and accessed their centres during the most recent voter registration and actual voting. Their understanding about the specific processes involved however varied with 50.0 per cent of them demonstrating a lack of knowledge regarding the fact that a voter could vote in a polling centre other than where they registered once a prior transfer of vote had been done.

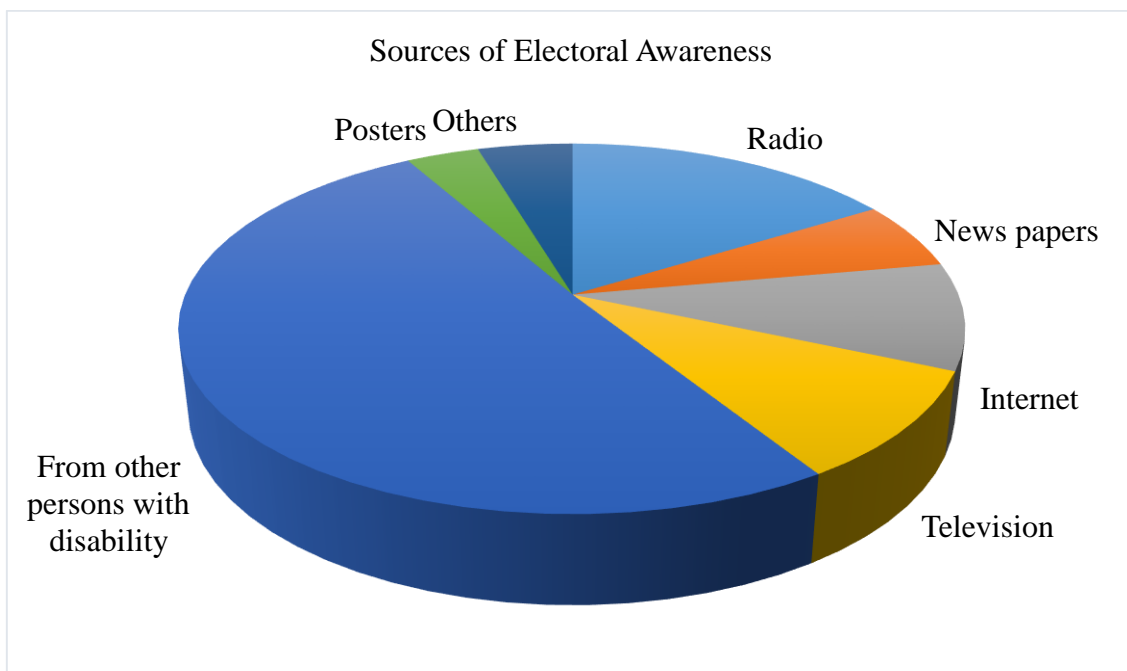


Figure 2: Sources of Awareness

The data in Figure 2 show that feedback from other persons with disability, either on a one-on-one basis or in groups was the major means by which more than half of the respondents (50.8 per cent) increased their awareness. The feedback included information regarding the dates and need for them to vote, passed to them either verbally or by means of social media particularly Short Message Service and or WhatsApp group platforms.

Meetings and posters were other dominant sources of awareness. The other sources were radio, Television and the internet. On their most impactful sources of awareness, a deaf woman narrated thus: *‘I also got the video through my WhatsApp. Because it contained sign language, I watched it (video) many times and I learned more about when the voting was going to take place and how to vote and vote well. Many of my colleagues told me that video was the only reliable source of their learning about the elections. We were told the video was produced by our national association and shared among members’*.

The identification of peers and associations of persons with disability as major sources of civic awareness among the women with disability supports the findings of Enyaawah (2017) that in Ghana, local movements of persons with disability were not only deeply rooted in the promotion of civic rights but actualised the participation in campaigns and election observation.

The ability to articulate voting dates, locations of their polling centres, the motivation for voting and the basic processes involved in voting during the last national elections strengthens a high-level civic awareness among the women with disability.

Willingness to vote and actually actively participating in voting, not doubt, symbolise a leap in civic participation of women with disability in Ghana. Conversely, voting simply because it is considered an act of responsibility as revealed by majority of the women with disability can affect the sustainability of their interest and participation. In the discourse on inclusive citizenship, responsibility goes with rights and where the latter is non-prioritised, the right to participate in and to vote by minority groups such as women with disability may be denied.

### **Gendered Systems in place for Women with Disability**

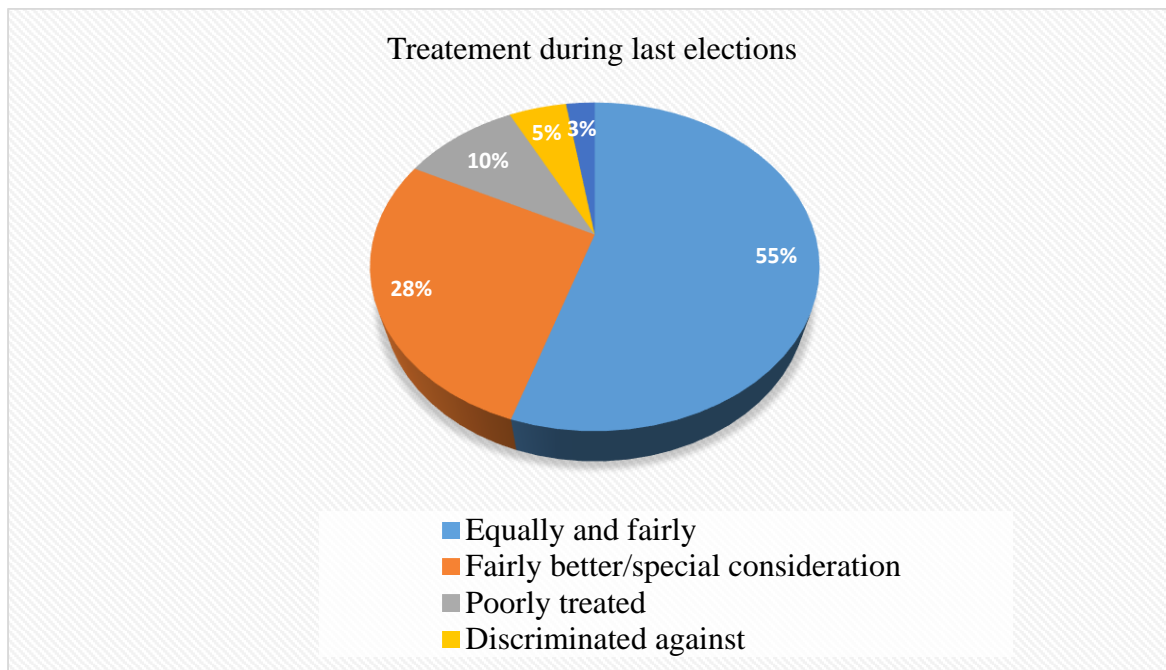
Beyond the conduct of voter registration and mobilization of the needed voting materials, key informant interviews revealed that the Electoral Commission of Ghana implemented a number of strategies spanning the period 2019 to 2021. These strategies were meant to increase the participation of persons with disability during voting. However, data on the actual number of persons with disability benefiting from the activities was unavailable. One informant said *'we conducted a one-day regional training for the blind on tactile voting method and voter education campaigns on accessible and inclusive voting. Also, we encouraged the media to report on the rights of persons with disability to vote. On voting day, we provided tactile jackets to polling centres for use by voters with visual impairment. We do not know the exact number of the disabled who benefited from these activities but they were many'*.

Feedback from respondents on the benefits of these strategies was imprecise and majority could hardly remember participating in any. This finding is consistent with earlier reports by a Ghana News Agency Report (2019)—that at the time the Electoral Commission of Ghana completed the training of persons with visual impairment, it was yet to collate statistics on the actual number of visually impaired persons that might require tactile jackets on the day of elections. An absence of details on the specific ways persons with disability benefit from such strategies challenge the relevance and appreciation of state driven civic efforts and invariably, their contribution to the voting right of women with disability.

Furthermore, the study revealed that 83per cent of respondents either heard and, or saw some messages regarding the 2020 general elections. Some of the messages such as *you count, get counted* contained issues about disability but there was none specifically targeting women with disability. About 30per cent of respondents agreed that their polling centres were very accessible while 24.2per cent felt that, except for a few physical barriers polling centres were fairly accessible to persons with disability. Nearly one in five respondents however maintained that their polling centres were not very accessible as they were characterised by long distance, stones, boulders, and shrubs, while other polling booths were situated on very high verandas that lacked ramps. On how barriers affected their access, a 37-year-old woman with physical disability explained that *"during the last elections I was able to get there and on time too but it was not easy because it is far from my house. My brother's child helped to wheel me there. I normally struggle to move around from electoral officers to the polling booths because it is a school ground with so many stones and the booths were placed on the veranda high up there. So, climbing there has always been difficult"*.

Majority of respondents affirmed that key inputs notably ballot papers and ink were available and their fairly user-friendly nature eased their voting. In a study by the Coalition of Domestic Elections Observers (CODEO (2020), it was found that 94.5per cent of the set-ups of most polling stations in the 2020 general elections in Ghana were easily accessible by persons with mobility challenges. On the contrary, the barriers in accessing polling centres as experienced by some respondents, even though few, cannot be underestimated when

juxtaposed with the United Nations Agenda 2030 principle of *Leaving No One Behind*. The presence of barriers supports Hall and Alvarez (2012) who maintained that mobility challenges associated with persons with disability often limit or restrict their movement to electoral centres for registration and casting of ballots. Inaccessible polling centres and inconvenience or difficulty in voting also raise concerns regarding the inclusivity of processes and systems that are in place to promote or support women with disability.



**Figure 3: Attitude of stakeholders towards Women with Disability**

As shown in Figure 3, 55per cent of respondents received same treatment as non-disabled voters. About 28per cent felt the treatment was fairly better than non-disabled voters due to the inclusion of some specific considerations that they were told were due to their disability. About 64.7per cent of those who were fairly treated indicated that they were asked to vote well ahead of other voters who arrived before them. Similarly, 51.7per cent of respondents with visual impairment confirmed that they were informed of the availability of assistive devices such as tactile jackets which could facilitate their voting. Nevertheless, nearly half of them did not use the tactile jackets. Rather, they preferred assistance from a relative with the reason that they were unfamiliar with the tactile jacket and had received no prior training on their use. Regardless of the reasons, systems and inputs may only be useful in the promotion of civic rights when the intended beneficiaries use them. With the exception of 7.8per cent of respondents with hearing impairment who revealed that a sign language interpreter was called in to facilitate communication with the electoral officers, no other targeted measure for any other disability group was found. Voting processes cannot be said to be inclusive when they have no special provisions for the other forms of disability.

Nearly one in five respondents (17.9per cent) however felt poorly treated or discriminated against by electoral officers, albeit covertly. Among the discriminatory tendencies were covert heckling by some voters, negative utterances, laxity in clarifying things and a show of impatience towards voters with disability. One-third of the respondents (29.4per cent) felt that the discrimination compounded what they believed was already a frustrating and tiring process of voting which could be avoided if they received special attention. A woman with hearing impairment explained;

*“I thought as someone with disability and a woman they would have at least considered me. On reaching the polling centre, the electoral officers looked too busy to even look at me. I was told to also join the queue. Other voters in the queue ignored me. Initially I felt because they did not know I was deaf. But when I signed to them, they just looked at me and wondered what I implied. I assumed there would be sign language service there so I did not go with an interpreter but was disappointed to find none. I was lucky to have voted after more than 5 hours in the queue”.*

Concerns about discrimination during voting is similar to findings from a study on the participation of persons with disabilities in the Ugandan electoral processes in which the National Council for Disability (2017) established that, in Uganda, electoral officers were often unfriendly towards voters with disability. A positive attitude of electoral officers is important for promoting the voting of women with disability. Electoral environments characterised by hostile and uncooperative officers and others can pose a great barrier to the exercise of the right to vote by persons with disability.

The study revealed that no special provisions were in place to meet the gender needs of women with disability. Nearly all the respondents maintained that they were treated virtually the same way as their male counterparts. Recounting her experiences, a 27-year-old blind woman who also has a physical disability said *“that election was my second time voting. I was lucky someone led me to the polling centre and what I heard the electoral officers and some young men saying was that they should give the person way to vote because she cannot see well and cannot walk properly too. Nothing was said about my being a woman or the fact that I was carrying a baby at my back”.*

An officer of the Electoral Commission also said *‘women and men with disabilities face the same challenges when it comes to voting, so we do not think there is need for specific systems for facilitating voting by women with disabilities’* The belief that any provisions for all persons with disability will equally benefit women with disability is contrary to the position of the National Council for Disability (2017) and the United Nations (2019) who concluded that, in the exercise of their civic right, women with disability often face additional barriers. These barriers may include time poverty due to care giving. Such barriers can be overcome if electoral officers have an in-depth appreciation of voters, particularly women with disability, and plan appropriately for them.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that a high level of civic awareness existed among the women with disability, and this manifested in their actual participation in previous elections and the ability to articulate the basic processes involved in voting in the elections. The women with disability perceive voting as a civic duty or responsibility that must be fulfilled more than a right to be claimed. For women with disability, their peers and associations remain their dominant sources of civic awareness. Even though systems, processes and inputs in place for promoting the participation of persons with disability in voting were fairly adequate, some women with disability faced difficulties due to misconception about gender differences. These misconceptions resulted in the absence of specific provisions to meet gender and disability considerations and may manifest in subsequent elections denying more women with disability their voting right if not addressed.

To guarantee and sustain the voting right of women with disability, statutory bodies need to engage and increase their provision of technical and material assistance to the associations of persons with disability. As these are already considered as conduits for civic participation, deepened engagement and support would make them more effective and supportive in realising the civic rights of the women with disability. Government should increase the involvement of women with disability in decision making regarding electoral processes such as gender and



disability friendly environment and assistive devices and support systems for the diverse disabilities. The existence of a Disability and Gender Desk in the Electoral Commission provides a good foundation for increasing the participation and influence of women with disability in elections. Decentralisation of the unit to sub-regional and district levels and a sustained interface with women with disability, from design to implementation of election activities may go a long way in enabling women with disability claim their right to vote sustainably.

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