

Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Syria: Untapped Legislation and Enduring Challenges



© UNICEF

Despite the relatively advanced legal provisions of the new Law No. 19, the lack of detailed implementation mechanisms, weak oversight and accountability, and misalignment of certain provisions with international convention standards significantly limit its effectiveness and utility



Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Syria: Untapped Legislation and Enduring Challenges

Despite the relatively advanced legal provisions of the new Law No. 19, the lack of detailed implementation mechanisms, weak oversight and accountability, and misalignment of certain provisions with international convention standards significantly limit its effectiveness and utility

- This publication was funded by **Legal Action Worldwide**. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Syrians for Truth and Justice and do not necessarily reflect the views of **Legal Action Worldwide**.

1. Disability in Syria: Escalating Hardship and Legislative Gaps

Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has caused a dramatic increase in the prevalence of disabilities, leaving hundreds of thousands with physical or mental impairments directly attributable to the war. According to [the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#), 1.5 million of the 3 million documented individuals in 2019 live with permanent disabilities, while over 86,000 have undergone limb amputations. Despite the severity of this crisis, Syrian lawmakers have failed to introduce meaningful legislative measures in recent years to address these urgent challenges.

Syria's worsening economic conditions have placed a significant and growing burden on persons with disabilities, severely limiting their access to essential treatment and prosthetic devices. According to the [OHCHR](#), the cost of a basic prosthetic limb is approximately \$1,500, while advanced smart prosthetics can reach up to \$60,000—sums far beyond the means of most Syrian families. Physical therapy sessions in government-controlled areas cost around \$24 each, further exacerbating the challenges for those in need. Adding to these difficulties, military personnel with disabilities exceeding 40% are granted a paltry compensation of just \$15, starkly illustrating the insufficiency of support even within this constrained system.

Despite this reality, the Syrian government has consistently failed to prioritize persons with disabilities in its public policies and legislation for over 50 years. The 2012 Syrian Constitution, like its predecessor, does not explicitly recognize or safeguard their rights. Article 22, largely carried over from Article 46 of the 1973 Constitution, contains only a vague provision ensuring care for citizens and their families in cases of emergency, illness, disability, orphanhood, or old age. Beyond this, the government's response has been limited to [Law No. 34 of 2004](#), which falls far short of guaranteeing the rights of persons with disabilities or addressing their needs comprehensively. To date, no inclusive legislation has been introduced to protect their rights, ensure a dignified life, or place their needs at the forefront of national priorities.

No meaningful efforts have been made to improve their quality of life or provide the necessary support for their integration into society, whether through education, employment, or access to essential healthcare services. This prolonged neglect highlights a lack of genuine commitment to addressing their challenges and a failure to comprehend the significant suffering this group endures, as well as the broader societal consequences. The Syrian state's inaction undermines societal stability, cohesion, and progress, while ignoring the untapped potential and valuable contributions that persons with disabilities could offer to national development.

In July 2024, the Syrian government introduced [Law No. 19](#), which is ostensibly aimed at improving the conditions of persons with disabilities. However, the law has faced significant criticism for its lack of clear implementation mechanisms and the absence of accompanying executive regulations, raising concerns that it may remain largely theoretical without delivering tangible changes on the ground.

Syria became a party to [the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) by signing it in 2007 and ratifying it in 2009, thus committing itself to the legal obligation

of implementing its provisions. Article 11 of the convention requires state parties to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including armed conflict, in accordance with international humanitarian law and human rights standards. Furthermore, Article 4 mandates the harmonization of national laws and policies with the convention's principles to guarantee the full recognition and realization of the rights of persons with disabilities.

In addition to the convention, [the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) offers an additional mechanism that empowers individuals to file personal complaints, further bolstering the safeguards for protecting and upholding the rights of persons with disabilities.

2. Law No. 19 of 2024: A Step Forward or a Repetition of Shortcomings?

While [Law No. 19 of 2024](#) represents an improvement over previous legislation, it continues to include gaps that obstruct its full implementation and prevent it from achieving complete alignment with the standards set by the [CRPD](#), which Syria ratified in 2009.

To start, the law lacks a comprehensive implementation plan and sustainable funding mechanisms. While it includes provisions mandating entities to provide reasonable accommodations (Articles 14–17) and promote inclusive education (Article 5), the absence of enforcement mechanisms and dedicated budgets leaves these commitments susceptible to delays and partial fulfillment. Article 4 of the CRPD requires state parties to establish detailed plans to ensure an effective implementation—a standard that this law falls short of meeting.

Furthermore, the law lacks a defined timeline for implementing its provisions, potentially leading to the neglect of critical priorities. While it emphasizes individual accountability (Articles 35–45) for acts of discrimination or abuse against persons with disabilities, it falls short in establishing clear mechanisms to hold public institutions accountable for failing to fulfill their obligations. These obligations include ensuring inclusive education, providing reasonable accommodations, and delivering essential health and social services. This gap creates a legal void that undermines the effectiveness of the provisions. Notably, Article 33 of the CRPD explicitly calls for independent monitoring mechanisms to oversee the implementation of obligations—a critical element absent in the current framework.

Regarding education, the law acknowledges the importance of inclusive education (Article 5); however, it permits the establishment of specialized educational institutions. This approach risks isolating persons with disabilities rather than integrating them into mainstream public schools. Such a stance directly contradicts Article 24 of the CRPD which emphasizes that inclusive education must serve as the foundation across all levels of education. This divergence widens the gap between local practices and international standards, undermining the principle of inclusivity and equal access to education.

In the realm of employment, the law stipulates a 2% quota for hiring persons with disabilities in institutions (Article 12). However, it falls short of mandating inclusive work environments or reasonable accommodations, a critical gap that contradicts Article 27 of the CRPD which

underscores the need to create fair and equitable working conditions. Additionally, the law neglects the right to independent living (Article 19 of the CRPD), as it lacks provisions to ensure community-based support systems that enable persons with disabilities to lead autonomous lives.

Moreover, with regard to political participation, the law (Article 21) acknowledges the importance of supporting the involvement of persons with disabilities. However, it fails to establish concrete mechanisms to ensure their rights to vote and run for office, potentially hindering the practical exercise of these rights. Furthermore, on the issue of social protection, Article 8 provides for financial aid to impoverished families caring for individuals with severe disabilities. Yet, the lack of clear criteria for determining eligibility leaves room for inconsistencies and unequal application.

Although the law (Article 22) highlights the significance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), it fails to assign them a central role in the development or monitoring of policies. This omission contradicts Article 4 of the CRPD which emphasizes the need to involve organizations representing persons with disabilities in the formulation and implementation of legislation and policies. Excluding these organizations raises concerns that decisions may be made without fully addressing the actual needs of persons with disabilities.

The implementation of the law requires a trained workforce across all sectors (including education, healthcare, justice, and transportation). However, Syria faces a significant shortage of specialized personnel, posing a major challenge, especially as the law fails to outline mechanisms for training professionals in these sectors to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, implementing the provisions of the law requires substantial investments in infrastructure and services. Given Syria's dire economic crisis, questions arise about the government's ability to allocate sufficient funds to ensure the law's enforcement. This also raises concerns about whether individuals with disabilities might be exploited to solicit donations or secure funding under the pretext of supporting their rights.

Additionally, Law No. 19 of 2024 assigns the National Council for Persons with Disabilities the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of the law and ensuring the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities (Article 26). However, the law fails to establish clear mechanisms for assessing the council's performance or monitoring its adherence to its assigned duties. This lack of independent oversight mechanisms raises significant concerns regarding transparency and accountability, potentially allowing inefficiencies or delays in fulfilling the law's objectives.

To demonstrate a genuine commitment to safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities, the law should include explicit provisions for evaluating the council's performance. This could involve establishing an independent body to monitor the council's operations or mandating the preparation and publication of regular reports subject to review by independent organizations. These measures are essential not only for ensuring the council's effectiveness but also for aligning with Article 33 of the CRPD which emphasizes the critical role of independent and robust oversight mechanisms in securing compliance with legal commitments.

Although the law introduces provisions that are theoretically more advanced compared to previous legislation, its effectiveness is significantly hindered by the absence of detailed implementation mechanisms, inadequate oversight and accountability measures, and the misalignment of certain articles with international standards. Bridging these gaps through clear implementation frameworks, well-defined timelines, and binding standards would strengthen the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and ensure the law's alignment with international obligations. Notably, as of the date of this report, [the executive instructions mandated by Article 53 of the law have yet to be issued](#), despite the passage of over four months since its enactment. This delay confirms the Syrian government's lack of urgency and insufficient commitment to implementing the law's provisions, despite the critical need for its application in Syria.

In her [report](#) submitted to the Human Rights Council in January 2024, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Heba Hagrass, emphasized the urgent need for state parties to amend their national laws, including those related to persons with disabilities, to align them with the international standards set forth by the CRPD. The report underscored that national legislation must embody the rights-based approach advocated by the convention, rather than being limited to offering services or privileges. It also called for the enhancement of legal provisions addressing non-discrimination, ensuring accessibility, and providing comprehensive legal protection. Furthermore, the report advocated for the establishment of effective national mechanisms to monitor the implementation of these laws and assess their compliance with international obligations. It highlighted that the lack of such legal harmonization perpetuates the marginalization and violations faced by persons with disabilities.

3. Law No. 34 of 2004: A Two-Decade-Long Catastrophe

The Syrian [Law No. 34 of 2004](#) remained unchanged for two decades, despite Syria signing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 and ratifying it in 2009. During this time, the Syrian conflict erupted, leaving hundreds of thousands injured and leading to an unprecedented increase in the number of persons with disabilities. Yet, no significant efforts were made to reform national legislation to align with international obligations or address the rapidly evolving challenges brought about by the war.

Law No. 34 was fundamentally flawed, offering a limited perspective on disability by confining its definition to physical and mental aspects, while neglecting critical sensory, psychological, and social dimensions essential for a holistic understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities. The law also failed to enshrine the principle of non-discrimination, leaving persons with disabilities without essential protections against systemic and institutional biases. Instead of guaranteeing their right to equal treatment, the law lacked enforceable provisions to ensure access to public and private services, perpetuating their exclusion and hindering meaningful social integration.

In education, while the law recognized the right of children with disabilities to schooling, it failed to mandate mechanisms for inclusive education. This gap led to their continued marginalization within the educational system. Furthermore, the absence of provisions

supporting independent living entrenched a culture of dependence, contradicting international standards that emphasize autonomy and self-determination.

Legal protections under the law were superficial, offering limited benefits without ensuring equitable access to justice. This left persons with disabilities vulnerable to rights violations with no effective recourse for accountability or redress. Finally, the law's lack of clear oversight and evaluation mechanisms impeded the monitoring of its implementation and allowed responsible entities to evade accountability for their obligations.

This prolonged delay in amending the law highlights a profound lack of genuine commitment to addressing the challenges faced by persons with disabilities and integrating their needs into public policy priorities. Rather than serving as a meaningful instrument to advance their rights, the law remained a superficial framework for over two decades, failing to meet their needs or improve their living conditions. This inaction has further deepened their suffering, particularly in the context of ongoing conflict and severe economic hardship.

4. Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Areas Outside Syrian Government Control

In areas outside the control of the Syrian government, there have been attempts to develop legal and institutional frameworks aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, despite significant challenges related to conflict and resource shortages. In northeast Syria, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria adopted the "[Social Contract](#)" as a legal framework governing areas under its control. This includes references to the rights of persons "with special needs" (Article 53) and principles of equality and non-discrimination. Additionally, several bodies and institutions have been established to address the needs of persons with disabilities, such as the Social Affairs and Labor Authority, community rehabilitation centers, and the Directorate of Social Welfare, alongside civil society organizations like the "Kurdish Red Crescent".

However, these efforts remain insufficient, as persons with disabilities endure harsh conditions exacerbated by years of conflict and its social and economic repercussions. For instance, [in Deir Ezzor](#), there is a severe deterioration in basic services, particularly in health and education. Persons with disabilities face acute shortages in health services and assistive devices, further compounding their daily struggles. While some community initiatives exist, the lack of serious attention from successive local authorities deepens their challenges and hinders their integration into society. Children struggle to access adequate education due to a shortage of equipped schools, and adults face barriers in accessing employment opportunities and healthcare. Under these circumstances, persons with disabilities in Deir Ezzor remain a marginalized group in urgent need of interventions to improve their living conditions and secure their basic rights.

On the other hand, in northwest Syria, no clear and comprehensive legal framework has been adopted to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. However, several initiatives supported by humanitarian organizations and civil society have been launched to improve the conditions of persons with disabilities, especially with the rising number of injured individuals

because of the conflict. Initiatives such as the “Free Syrian Red Crescent” and the “Syrian Forum” provide physical and psychological rehabilitation services, including prosthetic limb fitting. Additionally, some schools offer inclusion programs for children with disabilities, although these efforts often rely on individual initiatives rather than a comprehensive educational plan.

While areas outside the control of the Syrian government have made efforts to support persons with disabilities through institutional frameworks and local initiatives, the lack of adequate financial and legal resources significantly limits the effectiveness of these measures in addressing their growing needs. Greater support from international organizations and human rights entities is essential to ensure comprehensive protection and meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities within their communities.

5. Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned analysis and the pressing realities in Syria, which demand prioritizing the needs of persons with disabilities amidst the ongoing conflict, Syrians for Truth and Justice put forward the following recommendations:

1. **Explicitly enshrine the rights of persons with disabilities in the new Syrian Constitution**, ensuring their recognition and protection. These rights should be clearly and comprehensively defined to safeguard against any future laws or decisions that could diminish or undermine them.
2. **Develop a comprehensive national implementation plan** that includes clear timelines, identifies necessary financial and human resources, and guarantees the effective application of the law. Moreover, secure a sustainable budget dedicated to improving infrastructure, providing affordable assistive devices, and ensuring accessible healthcare and social services. Additionally, develop a robust policy framework that prioritizes the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, ensuring they receive services and support tailored to their specific circumstances.
3. **Strengthen the independence of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities** by establishing independent oversight mechanisms. Rather than solely requiring the council to prepare reports on disability and the rights of persons with disabilities, it should also be mandated to produce and publish periodic reports. These reports should provide a clear evaluation of how well government institutions, especially those specified in the law, fulfill their obligations and deliver the necessary support and services as stipulated by the law.
4. **Ensuring inclusive education** by amending provisions that allow the establishment of specialized educational institutions and prioritizing the adaptation of public schools to be inclusive for all. This includes providing necessary accommodations and training for educational staff. Furthermore, **strengthening the right to independent living** by explicitly mandating community support to empower persons with disabilities to live autonomously. Additionally, **ensuring workplace equality** by requiring public and

private institutions to create inclusive work environments and provide reasonable accommodations.

5. **Ensuring the active involvement of organizations representing persons with disabilities** as essential partners in the development and oversight of policies, fostering inclusivity and addressing their genuine needs. **Establishing robust mechanisms to guarantee their political participation**, including the right to vote and run for office without barriers, thereby advancing their full integration into political life. Additionally, dedicating a specific quota for persons with disabilities in key decision-making bodies, such as the People's Assembly, the Council of Ministers, and the judiciary.
 6. **Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks in areas outside the control of the Syrian government** by drafting policies that safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities and ensure their integration into society in line with international standards. This includes providing the necessary financial and technical support to empower local authorities and rehabilitation centers. Additionally, enhancing coordination between humanitarian organizations and local entities is essential to ensure the sustainability of services provided to this group.
-

ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

Convinced that Syria's diversity is a wealth, our researchers and volunteers serve with unfailing dedication to monitor, expose, and document human rights violations that continue unabated in Syria since 2011, regardless of the affiliation of the victims or perpetrators.