



A Chosen Message by Chosen Power (People First Hong Kong)

Together with mainland China, Hong Kong was reviewed by the [Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at its 8th session](#) in September 2012. A group of self-advocates from the organisation Chosen Power attended both the 7th and 8th CRPD Committee sessions to provide information on how their Government was upholding their rights, and used this experience to fuel their advocacy for the realisation of their political rights in Hong Kong.

[Chosen Power \(People First Hong Kong\)](#) is a self-help organisation founded in 1995. It is the first self-advocacy and self-help organisation run by persons with different learning abilities in Asia.



Chosen Power representatives and allies in front of the headquarters of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva © 2012 Chosen Power

In 2004, we were informed by the Company Registry that persons with intellectual disabilities could not be appointed as directors under Hong Kong Company Law. We amended our Constitution and were able to expand our membership to persons with other learning abilities. On 1 July 2006, we registered as a non-profit organisation, and in January 2008, registered as a company limited under Hong Kong Company Law.

The organisation is governed by 15 executive members with different learning abilities. It advocates for 'Liberty for All', 'Self Advocacy and Independence' and 'Inclusive Community with Respect to all walks of life'. Members live their lives with joy and dignity. Members are visible in the community. Members enjoy expressing their artful talents to tell their stories and make friends. The organisation now has over 100 members of different learning abilities and also established its parents' network in order to gain direct access to talk to the Government because the Hong Kong Government only provides consultative meetings with our parents and not directly with us!

Chosen Power is involved in promoting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) since January 2007 through workshops and interactive drama touring in community and schools.

After attending April 2012, the 7th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, members of Chosen Power partnered with members of the [Hong Kong Blind Union](#) to lodge a complaint against the Registration and Electoral Office of the Hong Kong Government to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in June 2012. The points of the complaint were:

1. Documentation for elections is not accessible to persons with visual disabilities and intellectual disabilities, and
2. Support persons provided at the voting stations to assist us in voting are not of our choice.





In response to the complaint, we met with the staff of EOC who explained to us the Anti-discrimination Law. However, it was not easy for we self-advocates and parents to understand the specialised jargon and procedure of anti-discrimination law, the process of lodging a complaint, and how to fill in the complaint forms.

The staff also had difficulty to explain it to us in simple language and cite easy to understand examples. EOC staff informed us that our complaint was not covered by the existing Anti-discrimination law and suggested that they arrange a meeting for us with the Registration and Electoral Office. Two separate meetings were held with the Registration and Electoral Office: one with our group of self-advocates, parents and support persons, and the second with blind and visually impaired persons.



Chosen Power representatives at the Registration and Electoral Office holding signs which read: "The voting system violates the Anti-Discrimination Law" © 2012 Chosen Power

The meeting with the officials of the Registration and Electoral Office took place on July 2012. It marked Chosen Power's first meeting with government officials since 1997 (when members attended annual Summit Meetings for persons with disabilities, chaired by the Governor and different policy and service bureau officials). Eleven self-advocates, four parents and two support persons attended the meeting. Our key concerns were about our political rights, information accessibility and our freedom to choose a support person at the voting stations. We supported our points by making references to the CRPD.

In particular, we raised the following issues:

1. All information issued by Registration and Electoral Office is not available in accessible formats.
2. Consultative papers, voter registration forms and letters are neither available in Braille text nor in easy-read materials. We need easy-read promotional materials and accessible forms for us to fill in.
3. Many of our friends living in hostels or institutions are not able to register as voters, neither their parents nor institution staff help our friends to register as voters! And even if they are registered voters, some of them are not able to vote due to a lack of transportation and staff support.
4. We are also troubled by the law that we are not able to have a supporter of our choice to assist us at the voting station!
5. People defined by the Mental Health Ordinance and the Guardianship Board as "mentally incapacitated" are deprived of their voting rights.



Meeting with the officials of the Registration and Electoral Office © 2012 Chosen Power

The Registration and Electoral Office scheduled the meeting in the evening of 24 July 2012. It was a historical moment: it was the first time the staff of the Registration and Electoral Office officially met voters of different learning abilities. We had a constructive dialogue, and a letter highlighting our concerns was submitted to the Electoral Office at the close of the meeting.

Since then, the Office has sent us a formal reply which has been disappointing; while noting our concerns, they said that the existing law is acceptable and they had no intention to review it. As for the provision of materials in accessible formats, they explained that they still needed to look into this and explore the demands and needs of voters. Our feedback was also shared with the Governor's Office and the EOC.



To date a [formal complaint has not yet been lodged](#); we have been informed by the EOC that we need to concretely show how we have suffered loss with respect to the restriction of our political participation due to the lack of accessible information and materials.

In September, we had the chance to test out the voting practice stations, and the 'so-called' accessible web-site. On the day of the Legislative Council elections, some of our members had difficulties finding the easy-read voting guide on site or they needed to wait for more than 45 minutes to receive it and then to vote!



Meeting with the officials of the Registration and Electoral Office © 2012 Chosen Power

The polling station staff were willing to help, yet at times were excessive in their assistance and made some of our members feel like prisoners being physically escorted on either side to vote while a third staff member acted as observer/witness. Though the Electoral Office told us they had trained their staff and volunteers on how to guide persons with disabilities to vote, we observed that there is still a lot of room for improvement.

Our advocacy did not stop at meetings and letters. Our second attempt to sensitise the Government took place on 17 December 2012 at the Legislative Council where we shared our concerns at the open hearing of the Concluding Observations on the initial report of China, as adopted by the Committee at its 8th session (17 – 28 September 2012). We gathered more than ten advocates of persons with disabilities to share our observations and recommendations after attending the CRPD Committee's 8th session. Five of our self-advocates took time off from their work and again voiced our rights to political participation.



Chosen Power representatives at the Equal Opportunities Commission © 2012 Chosen Power

We raised the [CRPD Committee's recommendations](#), in particular its concern about "the inaccessibility of some polling stations for voters with disabilities" (para 81) and its call to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region "to ensure the accessibility of all voting stations." (para 82). It seemed that the government officials were showing concern and hearing our voices. In response to the CRPD Committee's recommendations, they told us how much they spent on rehabilitation services and that they set up a working group promoting sign language in the past year. Yet they told us nothing about the timetable for producing easy-to-read policy documents and for harmonising the different laws in line with CRPD!

We have learned through these experiences that it will be a continuing process for us to sensitise government officials, Legislative Council members, and even our parents, on our rights and needs. Our advocacy is being taken both nationally and internationally.

We feel strongly that the CRPD should not remain on paper for discussion, but become action. We need to live the lives of our choosing. Our action and our participation in the community is the key to realising all our rights.