
DEVELOPMENTAL ARTICLES

**GENDER AND DISABILITY IN THE ARAB REGION: THE CHALLENGES
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

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ABSTRACT

Many women are discriminated against because they are women. Having a disability compounds this gender-based prejudice. Women with disabilities in many regions of the world including Arab countries suffer from this double discrimination. The study upon which this article is based analyzes the status of Arab women in general, gender relations in the Middle East, and the situation of Arab women with disabilities, based on available disability statistics from a few selected countries and the author's observations during her 13-year living experience in Baghdad, Amman, and Beirut.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women varies from one society to another; however, everywhere disability poses additional challenges for women. In conservative societies where the status of women is relatively low, it has a particularly negative impact, creating more challenges in their daily life.

Although state sponsored education accompanied by industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation has played a major role in creating a generation of more assertive and independent Arab women, the integration of Arab women in this relatively conservative society is still in its formative stage in the new Millennium. For instance, in the industrial sector, Arab women have some of the lowest participation rates in the world. Some Arab countries have made good progress during the last few decades. For instance, during the period of 1990-2000, in a tiny Gulf country, Oman, the country's female adult literacy rate almost doubled from 38 % to 62% (1). In 2000, the total fertility rates for women in the Arab region ranged from 2.3 (Lebanon) to 7.6 (Yemen) just to indicate the difference among individual countries, in contrast with the world average (2.8 per woman) and the average of industrialized nations (1.7 per woman) (1) The birth rate in Arab families remains relatively high, as children are considered to be valuable. The reproductive function of the Arab family, and particularly of Arab women, thus remains one of the most important functions.

Regarding literacy, adult literacy levels among Arab men continued to be higher than women. For instance, in Egypt, in 2000, female literacy rate was only 44 per cent compared to the male literacy rate of 67 per cent. Illiterate women are over-represented among older women in the region (1).

Recently there has been a significant increase in the number of Arab women participating in all levels of education in the Arab region. In this regard, Lebanon, Egypt and some liberal Gulf countries are pioneers in setting up educational systems integrating women. In fact, in some oil-rich Gulf countries, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, women's enrollment rate in higher education is higher than that of men. In Kuwait, in 1998, for every 100 boys, 214 girls were enrolled in higher education including universities (2). The oil money might have been the turning point for the Gulf countries. Educated women are more conscious of their human rights and more courageous in demanding them.

A gradual but steady increase in Arab women's participation in the labour force has also been witnessed in the last few decades. Their participation in formal employment has played a major role in changing status and gender relations. On the other hand, the dual functions of working mothers have imposed psychological pressure on them, as they have to cope with more than one role.

Generally, Arab women tend to get married much earlier than their male counterparts and they tend to get married to older men. Before, the early marriage of girls used to be an indication of the lower value of girl's education vis-à-vis other priorities which can be achieved through early marriage. First of all, it protects a girl in the traditional Arab culture, which still values "family honour". In poor families, the marriage of daughters reduces the financial burden of her family and eases their responsibilities. Another important factor is that a new family would become another source of "Arab Children" to enrich the nation's population. In war torn countries, some have encouraged births in a state of political tension or armed conflicts (e.g. the outbreak of the Gulf wars and continuing tensions, and the Israeli occupation of Palestine). Of course, in line with the changing role of women, changes in patterns of their marriage and life style emerge. However, new options and chances are open to the small proportion of the female population; namely the urban female population of the middle or upper middle class.

The situation of Arab women with disabilities is not changing at the same rate and often their problems are compounded by the traditional and impoverished segment of Arab society in which they live.

LITERACY AND EDUCATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

According to the official statistics, a while ago, in Syria, only 20 % of women with disabilities were literate, compared to 66% of the total female population who are literate and 40% for

men with disabilities (who are literate). In Bahrain, only 12% of women with disabilities were literate, in contrast with 59 % of the total population of Bahraini women, 79% of the total population of Bahraini men, and 36% of Bahraini men with disabilities. Literacy among women with disabilities was far lower than that of men with disabilities. On the other hand, in both countries, the percentage of women with disabilities who completed higher education was only one-third of the equivalent rate of men with disabilities. The gloomy picture is almost the same as of today (3).

According to a study in Lebanon, within households where more than one person is disabled (these households are quite common in Lebanon and other Arab countries due to common practice of kinship marriage) a disabled son is treated differently from his disabled sister. He is sent to school and she is not. One such example is a case of a brother and sister, both with motor disability. While the family managed to secure a wheelchair for the son, no such efforts were considered necessary for his sister (4).

EMPLOYMENT

Employment and income security are prerequisites for living a dignified life. However, Labour force participation of Arab women with disabilities is still very limited. For instance, according to the national census, a while ago, the "active" Kuwaiti women with disabilities was only 2 % compared to 10 % for the total Kuwaiti women, 20 % for Kuwaiti men with disabilities and 67 % for the total Kuwaiti male population. However, out of the 98 % economically "inactive" female population with disabilities, 20% are homemakers. This category of women with disabilities may well be involved in some kind of productive and meaningful activities at home (3).

The rate of 2% active women with disabilities looks hopeless. However, among economically active women with disabilities, 52 % were employed in professional and technical fields, and 35 % were in the clerical field. On the other hand, Kuwaiti men with disabilities tend to be employed in the field of services (38%), clerical work (25%) and labourers (16%) (3).

This gender-based difference may be a characteristic of oil rich Gulf countries where though a tiny portion, the majority of employed women with disabilities are in professional categories, with a high percentage of them earning good salaries and maintaining good social prestige. These relatively privileged Gulf women with disabilities may work for human dignity, personal satisfaction, intellectual stimulation, social prestige, and her own personal development, etc., for compound reasons. On the other hand, there seems to be more pressure on Gulf men (with or without disabilities) to earn an income, no matter what

occupations are available to them. Whether this is right or not, sometimes, a Gulf woman with disability and with a high academic background holds a unique position and develops her career on long-term basis. She can find a niche in this rather traditional society.

On the contrary, in resource poor non-oil producing and labour exporting Arab countries, such as Jordan and Egypt, the vocational training of women with disabilities must be accompanied by an immediate incentive of income generation upon completion, in order to invite support and cooperation from families who might otherwise be reluctant.

In Lebanon (resource poor non oil producing country), women with disabilities feel that the vocational training courses offered to them are too traditional and of questionable value. Even in this relatively modern Arab country, there is a strong assumption that it would be appropriate for women with disabilities to learn sewing and cooking and for their male counterparts to learn computer skills and electrical engineering, etc. It is very difficult for educated and trained Lebanese women with disabilities to attain respected positions in the private or public sector. Those few lucky ones who are able to find jobs often report discrimination in salary, and verbal, physical and sexual harassment at work and in public transportation. When active Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) lobby for recruitment of people with disabilities in the government or private sector, the majority of recruits are men, and with very few women benefiting from employment mainstreaming.

MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

Arab women with disabilities face more discrimination and difficulty in marriage. The only exception to this practice is the case of very mildly retarded women. Men may accept a young and pretty mildly retarded woman although women tend to refuse marriage to a mentally retarded man

According to the statistics in Jordan, a while ago, 62% of women with disabilities were single, 18% widowed, 16 % married and 3 % divorced. In Jordan, the ratios of the percentage of divorced Arab women with disabilities and of widowed women with disabilities, to the corresponding percentages for men with disabilities were extremely high (3 times and 6 times respectively). In the case of deaf and non-verbal persons, the rate of divorce is eight times more for women than men. This is a common phenomenon for women with all categories of disability and all countries in the Middle East. Some literature has confirmed this statistical trend (3).

Percentage distribution of people with disabilities by marital status, 1983, Jordan

Marital status	Total No.of women with disabilities	Total No.of men with disabilities	% of Deaf and mute men	% of Deaf and mute women
Single	62%	59%	67%	73%
Married	16%	37%	31%	15%
Divorced	3%	1%	0.4%	3%
Widowed	18%	3%	2%	9%

In the Arab region, marriage of women with disabilities is described as "very problematic", particularly when there is a doubt about a "genetic" cause for a disease such as muscular atrophy. For such women it is easier to find a partner in the West, where friendship and affection is more valued as the basis for marriage.

Arab women with disabilities are denied the most fundamental human rights including the right to love. Society in general fails to recognise the sexuality of women with disabilities and discourages the expression of their sexuality. In some cases, some parents have taken care of their disabled girls with affection and devotion through early childhood and often are astonished to find signs of adolescent sexuality later. They tend to over-protect them from aspirations that may not be achieved in the Arab world, even in the new millennium.

IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICTS ON ARAB WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Several countries in the region are war-torn or under civil unrest. For instance, from the perspective of Arab people, Palestine is regarded as an occupied territory by Israel. In this society, traditionally, disability has been considered to be shameful. However, negative perceptions of physical disability were changed first during the Intifada, the mass uprising of Palestinian people in 1987 and the continuing resistance. The issue of disability became an important political agenda all of a sudden. Retaliation by the Israeli military on Palestinian young men and teen-age boys throwing stones caused a sudden, huge increase in the number of people with permanent physical disabilities. The group most affected was youth who now suffered permanent physical disabilities. Though disability had a stigma before, it now became heroic, as a symbol of active resistance to the occupation.

The subsequent quick spread and development of rehabilitation services for people with physical disabilities in the West Bank and Gaza is a result of the emerging number of Intifada

war veterans. However, this politically high profile event now gave people with disabilities a different focus to the physical injuries of young war veterans. Disability was now perceived as "martyrdom", where young men sacrificed their lives to live in wheelchairs. This new focus diverted attention away from women with disabilities who suffered equally from the civil unrest. It also worked against those women and men with congenital and non-physical disabilities, such as mentally retarded women.

SOME CHALLENGES AND GOOD PRACTICES

Mainstreaming disability concerns

The issue of Arab women with disabilities should be tackled within the overall framework of women's development in the Arab world. Mainstreaming of Arab women with disabilities in education, training and employment should be a priority action. Many disability activists in Lebanon felt that mainstream women's movement in Lebanon failed to incorporate concerns of women with disabilities, and concurrently the weakness and immaturity of the mainstreaming women's movement in the country is limiting advancement and social integration of women with disabilities. However, some organisations such as the Youth Association of Blind in Lebanon is pursuing the disability mainstreaming strategy in order to legitimatise their cause and contribute to the diversity and also balance and strengthen the mainstream women's movement in the new millennium. These young assertive women with disabilities believe that the Lebanese women's movement and the disability movement have both gained increased visibility and empowerment through networking and alliances across the sectors, overcoming political differences.

Mainstreaming gender

Not many activities in organisations of people with disabilities or self-help groups in the Arab region have been exposed to the concept of gender mainstreaming or gender training. There is a need for gender training and capacity building. A number of leaders and associations have started seeing it as the top priority to improve their organisation's visions and programmes in the new millennium. The Lebanese Sitting Handicapped Association is a pioneer for instance in Lebanon, to initiate gender training and capacity building within the civil society of people with disabilities. They have organised computer training courses and more than 50 Lebanese women with disabilities were trained, in a mainstreaming setting together with men. Upon completion, they have lobbied for the recruitment of 27 women and 28 men graduates with the Ministry of Communication (5).

Information Technology

Recent technological advance with regard to Information Technology and globalisation in the Arab region have motivated the United Nations ESCAP disability programme to empower

women and men with disabilities. ESCWA is an active UN agency to promote minimising the existing gender-divide of Information Technology among people with disabilities. ESCWA is challenging the stereotypes about what is "appropriate" training and employment for Arab women with disabilities. They aim to encourage the active participation of women and men in the use of the Internet, e-commerce, virtual learning and e-livelihood. The organisation's activities aim to raise public awareness and to improve access to all types of electronic information for Arab women and men with disabilities. ESCWA implemented its first regional training centre for Braille computer, targeting blind girls and women, in the period of 1996-1999. The Centre is still highly regarded in the Arab region and the project was replicated in many places. In the New Millennium, in 2001, the second phase project to promote accessible Information Technology was launched. A new training Centre for Arabic Braille computer with link to Internet and Arabic speech synthesizer was opened in Beirut, with priority given to blind girls. A regional on-line electronic Braille documentation centre will complement this facility and blind Arab end users (from remote or conservative communities) will have full online access to Arabic/English documentation Centre. The majority of beneficiaries of this project are Arab women.

Public awareness

Arab women with disabilities are under-enumerated due to prevailing negative social attitudes. Also, available literature on gender and disability is limited. Public awareness of capabilities and dignity of women and men with disabilities should be boosted and their social integration should be promoted. Recently, some TV companies in Egypt and Lebanon, such as Future TV in Lebanon, have begun to be pro-active to promote the positive image of Arab women with disabilities, not through the traditional method of focusing on individual problems and needs but through mainstreaming them in dramas, comedies, and other entertainment TV programmes.

Disability prevention and kinship marriage

Kinship marriage which still prevails in the Arab region in this new millennium is a negative socio-cultural factor for inherited disabilities. In Jordan, the rate of consanguinity is about 50%, even in this new millennium. It was reported by Janson Staffan that kinship marriage rate of 67% in the experiment groups of parents with severely mentally retarded Jordanian children was higher than the national average (50%)(6). Even in liberal Lebanon, in 1990, 20 % of ever-married women and 24% of illiterate women liberal Lebanon were married to close relatives.

It is important to alert public opinion to the danger of intermarriage among close relatives. Education of women should be further emphasised as it has proved more effective than

educating men of the harm caused by consanguineous marriages. A new, open minded, yet culturally balanced genetic and sex counseling method should be developed and such services should be made available.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

From 1988 to 2002, the author served the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (Beirut, Lebanon) as a social affairs officer, in charge of disability programme. The views expressed in this article are those of authors and do not represent the views of the United Nations.

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