

An Open Discussion: Blind Women and How they Proved their Success in Marriage

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Because of women's role in building a good nation, and because of our conviction that a disabled woman plays a role in constructing an integrated society, and since the magazine *Asda' al-Mu'aqeen* (Echoes of The Disabled) had a special section on the disabled woman in its previous issues, it has again raised the topic in a special column entitled "They." This column offers a great opportunity to prove the disabled woman's role as an important part of this society which sometimes tries to humiliate and discriminate against her, first because she is a woman, and second because she is disabled. Her dreams are many, and more so her aims, since she still struggles hard to achieve her full rights, especially because she is still searching for her identity in a society which exploits and sees in her nothing but her body.

This is why *Asda' al-Mu'aqeen* wanted to repeat what it had pointed out in its previous issues, i.e. to confirm to all who ignore the truth about the disabled woman that she has more than ever proven to be a good mother, a successful employee and a first rate social activist, since with her intelligence she is able to disprove all that has been said to censure and marginalize her. We will find her effectiveness in special basic nooks and crannies if we help and support her to do away with all the obstacles in her way. In this

article we reveal what is disregarded in order to ascertain the disabled woman's will power, determination and magnanimity, in spite of all the violations she suffers, with the hope of being able to help her eliminate the obstacles in her way. A clear truth faces us after having spoken to three exceptional blind women who have been able to talk to us about their experience objectively and frankly, for they possess a strength and persistence which are rare in a society that judges a woman according to her appearance.

If one studies Mrs. Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili deeply, one finds in her a blind woman who faced the whole of society in order to overcome her blindness. She studied in the Baabda School for the Blind and Deaf, continued her higher education in the Lebanese University where she read Sociology. She then taught English, social studies and science in the Mabarrah School and is currently employed in the electricity company. She is married to Ismail al-Tufaili, who is not blind and works at the Ghandour factory in the oil department. She got to know him at the school in Baabda during the Lebanese civil war; they fell in love and married. They have three boys: Ali, Muhammad and Hussein. She goes through her experience of motherhood with pride, of marriage with love and refinement, and of work with energy and liveliness.

Matters do not stop here, for Mrs. Amal Saseen Hajjaj who has been partially sighted since birth, carries us into a dream world she was able to achieve as a woman. She studied in the Baabda School for the Blind and Deaf and pursued her university education at the Lebanese University in Tripoli, studying Law. After a wonderful love affair she married Rashad Hajjaj, who is not blind and whom she met in Egypt. They have one son, Shadi. She is currently a telephone operator in a hospital and her husband is a basket ball trainer who travels between Egypt and Lebanon. What distinguishes Amal is her energy and disorderliness for she is afraid to be left behind by the passage of time before she attains her aims as quickly as possible.

N.D. is a blind woman we interviewed who requested anonymity. In spite of this she was as frank as could be. She studied for two years in a Lebanese university but had to discontinue her studies for economic reasons. She married a non-Lebanese who fell in love with her, but who changed after their marriage. He is about 11 years younger than her and she did not have children because she married at an advanced age. She regrets having married a man endowed with eyesight because of the way he treated her after they got married.

N.D.'s experience is a very rich one, and she is adamant about the violence a disabled woman is exposed to in a male society which subjects her to bitter conditions. Hers is a clear lesson to any blind woman who discovers the negative results of a hasty decision she makes that might turn out to be wrong. Yet she smiles in the face of life, in spite of her troubles.

Asda' al-Mu'aqeen interviewed these women about their condition as blind married women who confirmed their role in a society that usually tries to ignore them, and whose courage endeavored to change this general attitude. This dialogue will introduce us into the special world of each of them.

Does the blind woman enjoy a normal emotional life in your opinion?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: My experience showed me that the way we treat each other is what makes our emo-

tions grow. The blind woman empathizes strongly especially if the other person is honest and treats her well. I want to say that when the blind woman feels that the man endowed with eyesight treats her objectively, not differentiating between her and any other woman, respects her capacities, knows her personality and blesses her existence, she grows emotionally and can make the proper decisions.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: The blind woman is just like any other woman, expected to use some wisdom and careful consideration in choosing her mate in order to be sure of his feelings and love. This confidence is the result of several experiences and difficult situations which prove to her how honest he is, how attached to her and how far he accepts her condition and is ready to maintain that noble relation which joins a man and a woman.

N.D.: I feel that blind women have very strong emotions and desire stability like any other girl with eyesight. We find these emotions in the heart of a woman even if she were not blind. I feel that woman is emotional, that this is part of her being, this is why her emotions might overcome her reason.

Did you have unlucky love experiences before your marriage? What did you learn from them?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: I did have a beautiful love affair from which I learnt a lot. I was in love with a blind young man, and my experience with him taught me that one must use her reason before her emotions, for I am against the marriage of two blind people, especially because of the children, unless they are materially well off. If they want to guarantee their independence they will face many problems. I say that reason should come before emotion, and that love which comes from mutual decent treatment after marriage can be more successful.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: Naturally I had such unlucky experiences, just like any other girl, and learnt a lot from them. They helped me to choose my life partner well so as not to make mistakes which would lead to our failure, such as disagreeing in thought and speech. Thank God I chose my husband well. He respects a woman, considers her an ideal human being and endorses her role in her society which often mistreated and abused her.

N.D.: I have not had unlucky experiences because I had not been in love before. I used to feel that the feelings of young men with eyesight might not be honest, or prompted by pity. This is why I always refused those with eyesight who asked for my hand. There were also blind men who asked for me in marriage, but I refused them because of my parents who believed it would be difficult

Man is a protection to woman if he is competent.

to start a home with a blind man. Although I am married now and have many problems, I am afraid my husband will love me less because he can see, is younger than me and good looking. I am afraid our marriage will come to an end. Fate has unified us and I am afraid fate will part us because of society, although I am sure of his conviction. But he has become less convinced of his choice of a blind woman as a wife. This is apparent in his neglect and inattentiveness.

How can a man with eyesight see the girl of his dreams in a blind woman?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: I, personally, was very audacious. From the first time I met him my husband attracted my attention. When we got to know each other we discussed things and this affected my husband, Ismail. My way of talking drew him closer to me and my personality made him love me. Here we started expressing our mutual feelings. A man who is aware searches for what makes a woman, not for her physical appearance, for a person's core is very important and willpower plays an important role. When a man with eyesight thinks like this, he treats a blind woman the way he would treat any other person. It is society that is disabled.

Amal Saseen: A man with eyesight cannot see the girl of his dreams in a blind woman unless she proves to him that she is as capable as any other girl, and that she is worthy of him in her understanding of him, her morals and social work, this is besides her physical appearance, her background and her upbringing.

N.D.: This depends on the man's personality. I have doubts about a man with eyesight. I married my husband because I wanted to be a mother and have a child. Now I am 45 years old and he is almost 11 years younger than me. I do not want to cheat my reason and my heart. Today I am very frank and afraid to lose my husband, especially since we have been married for a year and a half and I still have not given birth. A child is a strong bond between a woman and a man, although my husband might leave me one day for a younger woman with eyesight.

On what did you base yourself when you decided to marry?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: In the beginning I felt it was difficult to take the decision to marry, and was afraid of facing such a resolution, especially since the economic situation plays an important role. When we decided to marry I forgot the economic need, and my husband's support gave me the strength to face the situation. If a man is capable he protects a woman. His strong personality

makes her overcome the difficulties. As an Oriental girl I discussed this marriage with my parents and after they were sure of his honesty they helped me make up my mind. I never felt him to be afraid of facing things, and my love of confronting difficulties, together with other factors, encouraged me to go through with this marriage.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: The trust between us was enough to make us take this decision. I found in Rashad an understanding husband, willing to participate in facing the difficulties of life, capable of fighting and challenging in order for us to marry. Our mutual love was enough to take this important decision.

N.D.: All my life I had hoped to have a home and wear a white wedding dress because I wanted to bring up an ideal family. My hope is to have children who will be outstanding in society. But unfortunately I did not wear that white dress, due to problems and a hasty marriage.

What were the problems you faced? And how did you overcome them?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: The first problem was Ismail's parents. They did not accept the idea and refused to ask my parents for my hand for fear that their son's marriage would fail and that he would face difficulties. The second problem was that we did not have an independent home.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: I faced a big problem with my parents. They strongly opposed my marrying Rashad because he is Egyptian and of a different religion. They believed that the difference in religion and traditions would kill our marriage. What made them oppose my marriage was their fear for my future with him and their not knowing the society in which I would be living. But I insisted on my wish and managed to convince them that my choice was the right one. My husband's correct behavior also helped and proved to them that he was worthy of their confidence. This made them agree to our marriage, especially since his parents did not disagree at all to their son's wife being blind, and left him to choose freely, fully confident in him. They love me dearly and our relationship is excellent. We are one family now, for better or worse.

N.D.: Frankly, I still face problems, especially because his job is not stable. He works in a tile factory, the salary is

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very poor, and we live with my parents because of our difficult economic situation. We are financially incapable of having a home of our own and I do not feel that we are independent.

Was motherhood a challenge to every refusal you met with?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: For me motherhood in itself was a challenge because I could not bear children for eight years. We underwent treatment, which has nothing to do with my blindness. Concerning my not becoming pregnant did not cause either his parents or mine to bother us. After eight years of treatment we were blessed with our first son Ali. And after him came Muhammad and Hussein. All of which was thanks to God. I did well as a mother, my children do not feel their mother to be different. They are successful in school, and as loving parents we both help in their education.

I am happy because I find comfort in an understanding husband.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: Of course after my motherhood those around us became more convinced of our capacity to face with courage and defiance every problem we encounter. We bear the responsibility of our home and our three-year-old son Shadi. I take perfect care of him and do what any mother with eyesight does, for I never have him want for anything a baby

needs. My affection, love and care for his special needs are evidence of my being strong and persevering, and I shall never let him be in need of anything.

Note: N.D. did not become a mother, but her faith in God is strong.

How does your independence as a blind woman show in your housekeeping?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: When I was still single my mother trained me in housekeeping, then the Baabda School for the Blind taught me independence. So now I have no difficulties looking after my home. Parents also play a major role in this, not only regarding housekeeping but also all other paths of life. I tidy my house and carry out all my duties, including cooking and shopping on my own.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: I am just like any other married woman who is a mother and works. My duties are many,

but I can accomplish them all because I divide my time: in the morning I prepare my son for kindergarten, tidy the house and prepare the meals. My husband assists me in many things and is very helpful, he never moves something from its place without telling me so that I will not have to bother looking for it. Besides that, I have appliances that facilitate my housework.

N.D.: I am a first class housewife and completely independent in my housekeeping, just like any other woman. I carry out my duties perfectly well.

How do you visualize the family's future?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: I am sure of myself and have great dreams, I feel that my family life is successful, and hope that my children will thrive in their studies, faith and thoughts. I am optimistic and follow my children's education closely and relentlessly. As regards my relation to my husband it is excellent and nothing will spoil it.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: I am very optimistic, and, God willing, the future will be ours because our married life is stable and built on mutual understanding, support and love. I also have great hopes for my son Shadi since he is intelligent and is used to helping me in spite of his young age.

N.D.: Now I am sorry I married a man who sees because I started feeling that he makes a distinction between me and other women, especially when we go out together. When we first got married my husband gave me dreams that disappeared very quickly, for his treatment changed after we got married. He became indifferent in society, we only went out once together after we got married, he does not like to go out with me, and I feel that the only reason he is ashamed of me is my blindness. He does not want me to mix with his friends' wives and keeps me away from them because I am blind. This is the truth and I am sorry I did not marry a blind man who understands my condition because it is his as well.

What would you say to blind girls whose love affairs failed?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: I think that a girl fails if she falls in love with a man who considers her with pity or idealistically. If a man is aware and mature the love affair is bound to succeed.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: I wish that they choose well after carefully studying their companions' personality and their readiness to accept the girls' condition, to support and help their wives face the difficulties of

life's problems. I wish all this before they bind themselves to anyone.

N.D.: I advise every blind girl never to marry a man with eyesight because one of these days he will differentiate between her and other women, although some marriages between blind girls and men with eyesight are successful. A woman should bind herself to a suitable man, be sure of his feelings, and not take a hasty decision. This is what happened to me and I still suffer greatly from my husband's neglect.

Where do you place yourself today as mother, housewife and working woman?

Zeinab Mu'awiya al-Tufaili: I coordinate between my duties towards my husband, children, home and work. I hate routine and boredom, for emptiness harms a person and makes him lazier. This is why I enjoy being tired when I obtain a result.

Amal Saseen Hajjaj: Since I work outside my home, and am responsible for my house, husband and educating my child, besides my social life, life's pressures and the economic pressures, I feel tired, just like the rest of working wives and mothers. I do not have much time for rest, but I am happy because I find rest with a husband who is understanding and sympathetic.

Note: N.D.'s unstable family life has not permitted her to live as a housewife, and her closed society also prevented her from having contact with the outside world, besides the fact that she was deprived of experiencing motherhood.

This investigation showed experiences which differ from each other, yet we find some similarity between Zeinab and Amal's good relationship with their husbands and society.

Zeinab's long wait before having children was a great challenge to society's expectation of motherhood from every female. Although there is no relation between blindness and not having children quickly, which is God's will, her bearing children was a victory over all the tongues that tried to minimize her role as a blind woman, while others sought to negate her capacity and marginalize her. On the other hand we find that her husband Ismail's decision to marry a blind woman showed a lot of defiance and resolve. He stood by the woman he loved without being influenced by a society which differentiates between people. He faced those obstacles with the strength of the lover who defends his position with an independent and sure mind.

Amal's experience shows her and her husband Rashad's defiance of difference, whether of religion, country or background. They stuck together for better or worse, confronting all the doors that were closed to them during their long love story. All this goes to prove her to be an intelligent person in choosing such an honest husband who never let her down, in spite of her parents' refusing him. Through his respect and confidence in her and her family he proved the progressiveness of the Oriental man who seeks the essence of a woman with love and admiration.

Finally we come to N.D. who failed in her marriage. Her hasty decision in choosing a younger partner, his limited income and their not having children might all have been the reason for the change in his feelings towards this poor woman. But whatever the cause, women in general, and the blind in particular should use their reason before their heart in order to guarantee a respectable life with the person they marry. This woman's suffering is great, but, nevertheless, she is strong in spite of her problems. Her husband continues to impede her psychologically since he refuses to let her out into society, her only companions being the walls of her home, while she is longing to find in her partner a friend, brother, lover and real husband. Yet she still has to face her failed marriage, which has developed her awareness and made her search for future solutions that might lessen her burden.

Whatever the facts, N.D.'s experience will not make us look at the empty half of the glass, but will make us take an obstinate stand in not disparaging the role of the blind woman who succeeded, as was clear in Zeinab and Amal's stories.

"Marriage between a blind woman and a man with eyesight is not easy" is what people say who are surprised to see this happen in reality. But our answer is that it is very easy for a man who is aware, cultured and civilized to see in a woman the saintliness of the mother, the luminosity of the wife, the honesty of the sister and the love of the lover. When this takes place the impossible becomes easy, and the darkness of blindness triumphs over all the ignorance and rejection a blind woman might face.

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