

# Disabled Women and Body Image

■ Roula El-Helou

Disability Activist, Lebanon

*I stand in front of the mirror  
I talk to myself  
I observe my figure  
I become immersed in the mirror  
And I fail to find a soul more beautiful than myself  
As such, I live in contentment  
I live with that wheelchair  
I fail to differentiate between the wheelchair and my body  
I remain in it with all responsibility  
Making of my world a reality  
What do I care if society sees me?  
I am just a disabled woman  
I hear them whispering it's the wheelchair that is moving her  
I shout back freely: it is I who am moving the wheelchair*

## Difficulties Faced by Disabled Women

The disabled woman is faced with a lot of challenges in society. Despite that, she remains strong given that she pays the price first for being a woman and second for being a disabled woman. All she is armed with in this difficult and problematic journey for survival is her self-confidence and self-contentment. The disabled woman's family also plays an important role in building her personality and improving her life conditions. They are responsible for her positive and confident advancement

in society especially during her adolescence, a period that is very critical and delicate. During this phase her personality starts developing, she starts fancying wearing make-up, mingling with friends, going on outings, and trying to attract boys. She might feel the difference between her and "ordinary girls" her age if her parents failed to provide her with the support needed.

The disabled girl leads a very turbulent life during her teens given that she is plagued with very many worries and concerns. These anxieties might develop into a huge barrier if she fails to face up to her reality with its negative and positive aspects. During this period she questions herself endlessly. Will I have a male friend like all other girls? Will I be a wife and mother one day? Will I be responsible for a house and family one day? All these questions and uncertainties might not be answered lest she tried to live her life following the example of "ordinary" girls despite the enormous suffering she might endure and that are imposed by one's reality and Eastern society.

## Disabled Women and Body Image

A disabled woman in our society is more like a heroin in a novel. She lives in a battlefield and struggles on all lev-

els especially when building a serious relationship with a man. She requires a man who understands her not one who sees her as a body. She lives in an extreme struggle given that she knows very well how men view a disabled woman.

Many of the female friends and colleagues I meet complain about and suffer from their failed relations with men who befriend them in order to reach indecent motives. Herein lies the difference between men and women and the way they view love. According to some men, love implies fulfilling one's innermost sexual desires. Besides, men take it for granted that disabled women are in need of satisfying their sexual desires and should feel lucky to experience a sexual relation in spite of their disability. Moreover, men presume that women are unable to detect their true intentions and ulterior motives. Women by nature are very sensitive and emotional; hence, they have to be extremely cautious when entering a relationship. A woman has to constantly test her partner to determine how attached he is to her and how much he loves her. It is imperative to do so given that sexual exploitation is damaging. It might rob her of her self-confidence, mark her for life and make her hold a grudge against the opposite sex.

#### **Men and the Way they View Disabled Women**

Rarely does the idea of getting romantically involved with a disabled woman cross a man's mind given that he is influenced by his society that disregards a disabled woman and undermines her role as wife and mother. Much of the discrimination experienced by disabled women is based on an implicit notion that she is not the same as other women and so cannot be expected to share the same rights and aspirations. This does not imply that men do not fall in love with disabled women. Yet, men are influenced by society and its negative portrayal of disabled women, hence men surrender and accept these false stereotypes at face value. According to parents, disabled women fail to meet the requirements society places on women. They are often perceived as incapable of being "good wives and mothers." Moreover, relatives and friends are convinced that disabled women are incompetent when it comes to equal partnership, running a house and engaging in an intimate and sexual relationship. Here lies the important role the man plays in protecting his partner and defending her. He should serve as her guardian and supporter in shielding her from all the prejudices widespread in society. He has to be convinced of his choice of partner and stand by her.

Mind you, the role the disabled woman has to play is as significant and crucial given that she has to be honest, straightforward and self-confident while trying to explain

to her partner the details and realities surrounding her disability without feeling embarrassed. She shouldn't shy away from explaining how she showers and gets dressed. Moreover, she should be open about her sexual desires, her feelings regarding her body and the manner in which they should make love. She should be honest about the problems they might face while making love such as unexpected urination, inability to control or move one's feet and many of the other problems that might arise, yet do not necessarily stand in the way of fulfilling one's sexual desires.

Men should join forces with their disabled wives and support them. In doing so they sustain and bolster their role as mother and housewife where they equally share their married life and its responsibilities. Subsequently, the way she is viewed by society improves, especially if she conceives, given that Eastern society still places a high value on this.

Last but not least, there are men who are unaware, ignorant and completely oblivious to the plight of disabled women. This category of men disregard disabled women, ignore them totally, feel sorry for them and pity them to an extent that they tend to limit their capabilities and eradicate them. Hence, these men are responsible for a lot of the psychological violence disabled women suffer from. All this is due to men's ignorance of the situation of the disabled and their total rejection of this group of women given that they aspire to get involved with perfect and beautiful women.

#### **The Way "Ordinary" Women View Disabled Women**

Disabled women are stereotyped and discriminated against by "ordinary" women who see themselves as more beautiful, attractive and seductive. Some women use their good looks to try and overshadow disabled women, however, a smart disabled woman is aware of this and refuses to be affected by such a stance. She is armed with ample self-confidence that will allow her to defy and oppose the way she is viewed by "ordinary" women. Hence, she pays attention to her outward appearance and is an equal partner in building society by involving herself in all its aspects, be they political, economic, or social.

#### **Disabled Women and Sexual Life**

The disabled woman in our society is still shy about disclosing her hidden and innermost sexual desires given that her chances of marriage are minimal. This is due to the way she is viewed by men and society. Hence, she is unable to lead a normal life like any "ordinary" women. This creates immense desperation and frustration. The only way she can avoid breaking down and sinking into desperation is through the support she receives from

the people around her. Moreover, disabled women have to cope with the fact that they might never get married or conceive and have to want to continue living despite that. Girls from a very young age start dreaming of getting married and becoming mothers. Most girls play with dolls and pretend that they are their daughters. Given that motherhood is an innate feeling they possess, the role of a mother is a part they long to play in real life.

#### **Discrimination between Disabled Women and Men**

Society discriminates flagrantly against disabled men and women. That is due to the reign of patriarchal values and standards in the Arab society and their dominance over the feminine society. The effects of patriarchy are blatantly visible in the areas of work and marriage. It is important to note that men also discriminate between "ordinary" women and disabled women. Disabled men, in Eastern society, are more eager to begin a partnership and marry disabled women given that they share the same experiences. Besides, disabled men consider disabled women to be more perfect and stable when it comes to sustaining a relationship.

#### **Conclusion**

Despite all the discrimination she encounters and in spite of all the prejudices and inequalities she is faced with, the disabled woman relentlessly looks for her rights. The discrimination and violence she is subjected to by non-disabled/disabled men and women as well as by society falls short of depriving her of her dreams and aspirations. Hence, she becomes more like the Mona Lisa where no one knows the secret behind her inner beauty. Besides, she makes of her determination and defiance a righteous sword unconquerable by violence or by darkness.

The isolation and exclusion of disabled women even extends to mainstream women and women's movements, which deny us our rights and identity.

Isolation and confinement based on culture and traditions, attitudes and prejudices often affect disabled women more than men. This isolation of disabled women leads to low self-esteem and negative feelings. Lack of appropriate support services and lack of adequate education result in low economic status, which, in turn, creates dependency on families or care givers.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

