

Disabled Women in the United Arab Emirates

■ Munira bin Hindi

President of Bahrain Mobility International, Bahrain.

When I tried to write about the state of affairs of the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates, I enquired from myself about the subject before writing a single word, as I am a woman from the area suffering a physical disability since my childhood. Therefore, I am a person who most lives, lives with and feels with the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates.

I tried to ask myself whether I had ever felt a difference between myself and others since I am disabled in all areas: education, work, family life and finally emotional life. Did being a disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates make me different from any disabled Arab woman? Is there a common denominator between us in spite of the geographical differences between the places in which we live?

I found myself going several years back and retracing my past life, comparing it with what is happening now, that is, between the past and the present, and with what the women's state of affairs was in the United Arab Emirates. The woman used to play a positive role in the life of her family! She used to rock the cradle with her left hand and eliminate the difficulties of life with her right hand! She was the mother who sup-

ported the man, the wife who struggled with him, and even played his role in directing the family affairs during his absence on a trip which would last several months a year. In spite of her being deprived of education she was strong, courageous, adapting to the events in the Gulf and living with them. And when education started spreading in the United Arab Emirates, women started participating in much of it, learning both in the local schools and abroad.

Thus she has been appointed to many posts for decades, specialized in all the difficult scientific fields, and women in the United Arab Emirates managed to become ministers, ambassadors, members of parliament and of the state consultative councils. Naturally, she had to struggle for her cause, break the taboos and overcome all the difficulties. Yet, in the end, she arrived.

Such is the life of a normal woman from the Gulf area, a woman who is not disabled. But what about the disabled woman? Was she able to pass through the phases of life like her sister who is not disabled? Was she able to be part of the educational system and obtain educational and training credentials? Was she able to work and marry? Was she able to integrate in society?

Of course education in the United Arab Emirates was never restricted or limited to teaching disabled women. Ever since beginning their education the disabled, and especially the physically disabled, were mixed with the others. But no plans had been made to overcome the difficulties faced by some of the disabled persons in a number of schools, institutions and universities, and this led to the decline of some of them, especially those who were severely disabled or who were not supported by their families to help them integrate. Blind women, however, were not integrated in schools when education began, so most of them are restricted to reading the Qur'an at home.

Speaking about the other forms of disability, their share of education is close to nil. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, educating disabled women started more than 20 years ago and has overcome all the obstacles that were in the way. The ministries of education have begun to take a new course by establishing administrations specialized in educating those with special needs, caring to completely integrate the disabled persons, whether male or female, regardless of the kind of disability they are suffering from, taking into consideration their needs and capacities. Thus the disabled woman started assuming her positive role in education and eliminating the obstacles she faces. In general, both family and society supported her faith and insistence on her right to live like others.

As a result of this progress, and depending on her educational and training diplomas, she started joining the workforce according to her specialization, just like her non-handicapped sister, with the difference that the disabled woman insists on obtaining the facilities that help and support her in her work. She has succeeded in her

education in spite of the difficulties, and has obtained many positions in all domains. The disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates has participated in social and other fields of work, not hindered by her disability, but facing many difficulties.

Regarding society in general, society in the Gulf area usually has different attitudes towards the disabled persons: some really believe in them and offer them all the support they need; others still believe that the disabled person is constantly in need and requires continuous guardianship. Although this attitude still persists sometimes, it is starting to change, especially among the disabled women themselves.

Regarding the economic side of life, her economic standard has started to improve as a result of her having joined the workforce and her depending wholly on her own income. However, concerning those women who are not working and are from middle class families, the governments of the United Arab Emirates guarantee them a symbolic income sufficient for their needs, besides all the appliances and utensils they need.

The only thing that the disabled woman still suffers from is her right to marry, with no sign of change in this respect. Families and society still regard the disabled woman as an inferior who cannot tackle family life and thus object to her marrying. And if she does marry it would be in spite of the families! Notwithstanding this attitude, we do sometimes see a disabled woman marrying either a disabled or a non-disabled man.

This, in a nutshell, is the state of affairs of the disabled woman in the United Arab Emirates.

The protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities is about:

- *The rights and dignity of all people with or without disability.*
- *The rights to freedom and justice to all people with or without disability.*
- *The confirmation and support that persons with disabilities have the same rights as all other people.*