

The Disabled Yemeni Woman

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The number of disabled women in the Republic of Yemen is more than a million. Yemeni society is conservative and individuals cling to the prevalent customs and traditions that oppress women, treat them unjustly and consider them inferior. This contradicts Islam, a religion that honors women and has given them many of the rights which some try to deprive them of in the name of customs and traditions, and sometimes in the name of false interpretations of Islam. Inequality is prevalent in spite of the fact that most of the government laws do not discriminate against women and do not prevent them from obtaining their

rights. On the contrary, the government tries to apply a policy granting women their rights to education, work, participation in politics, etc.

Some discriminatory laws that deprive women of many of

their rights still exist. However, several government organizations have taken steps to change these laws. The government has started to respond and has taken many measures that call for women's full participation in all domains of public life. This is why the percentage of girls attending schools, universities and institutions has risen, resulting in a decrease in illiteracy rates among women, and an increase in the number of women doctors, teachers, lawyers and judges. Women now have access to all positions and posts, thus we have female ambassadors, ministers, under secretaries of state, etc.

Despite the efforts exerted by the government as well as non-governmental organizations, treating women as inferior beings, minimizing their value and not acknowledging their role in the development of society is still widespread. Besides, those who oppose the women's cause are fighting women in all possible ways.

After having exposed the general condition of women, I will now turn to the disabled woman. If an "ordinary" woman is a victim of all kinds of violence and bitter humiliation, the disabled woman is exposed to all this twice: first because she is a woman, and second because she is disabled. The disabled woman is still deprived of

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many, if not all, of her rights. She is deprived of those rights on five levels:

The First Level: That of the State and its Various Organs

The state deprives the disabled woman of most of her rights, if not all, by ignoring her needs in its legislations and programs. When the government promulgates a law it does not take into consideration the special case of the disabled woman and her specific needs and hardly includes her in its policies and agenda. The state fails to differentiate between the situation of disabled women and that of "ordinary" women. Hence, even when the state concentrates on the disabled woman and includes her in its programs, it still talks about her in general terms given that there are no programs specifically tailored for her.

When the state started preparing special laws for disabled persons and promulgated the law for the care and rehabilitation of the disabled in 1999, it was issued as a general law with no attention paid to the special conditions and specific needs of the disabled woman.

There are physically disabled people in various government, private and public buildings, but these buildings fail to comply with accessibility requirements for the disabled and are not accessible to a wheelchair user. This is considered a main obstacle preventing disabled women from participating in most activities. Moreover, it hinders them from acquiring their basic rights, and mainly their right to education given that many of the educational facilities such as schools, institutions and universities are still not equipped to accommodate disabled persons, have no special signs for the deaf or Braille for the blind, or specialized staff to help out.

The Second Level: Society

Up until now, both men and women in society have failed to accept disabled persons. They believe that the disabled in general, and disabled women in particular are either a curse on the family or a burden on both family and society. According to them a disabled woman has no value. Hence, many families work hard on hiding their disabled daughters and sometimes go as far as denying they even exist by locking them away the way animals are confined.

These families deprive them of their most basic rights but primarily their right to education and schooling. Parents prefer to send their non-disabled children instead. This is the case in well-to-do families. However, if the family is poor, sending a disabled girl to school is out of the question. She is kept at home to serve the family and is treated like a maid. After the death of her parents, it is her

older brother who inherits her share, and after she moves to his house she is still treated as a servant whose opinion is never asked and who is still deprived of all her rights.

This is the attitude of the family. Socially too, disabled women are discriminated against. Society considers disabled women to be inferior. They are looked down upon, mocked, shamed, and made fun of; they have no right to get married given that they are considered unfit for marriage. Disabled women are viewed as incapable of being responsible for a family, a husband, children or any other obligations.

The Third Level: The Media

The Arab media in general and the Yemeni one in particular, overlook disabled women. The media represent disabled women in a manner void of all respect and esteem and full of sarcasm. It indirectly deprives them of all their rights since they do not make the public aware of their issues and concerns. They fail to highlight how disabled women should be treated, cared for, and respected as human beings and not as inferior beings. Moreover, in its programs, sitcoms and films the media can often be condescending towards the disabled. Thus we regularly hear comments such as "Do I lack a hand or foot?"

In addition, those working in the media know nothing about the needs, issues and rights of disabled women. Besides, they are unwilling to make society more sensitive to their rights and fail to deal with them as equals to non-disabled women.

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The Fourth Level: The Non-Governmental Organizations

People in charge of non-governmental organizations, whether working on general issues or women's issues, are no different from society in neglecting the disabled woman and all her rights. They do not include her in their programs and projects, either directly or indirectly. Besides, those organizations specialized in the disability issue prepare programs and projects that aim at the rehabilitation and training of the disabled woman. They do not concentrate on inclusion, hence they fail to integrate her into society and boost her self-confidence. On the contrary, they try to isolate her from society and do not ask for any of her rights.

The Fifth Level: The Disabled Women

We have noted society's attitude towards disabled women and its rejection of them, starting with the family that treats them as inferior beings, deprives them of all their rights, and considers them incapable of depending on themselves; moving to society that minimizes their value, taunts them because of their disability and treats them as inferior beings; to the media which presents them in an unjust way and does not play its role in creating an awareness of disabled women's rights and their importance to development; to the non-governmental organizations that do not try to integrate them in society and insist on their rights; and last but not least, the state that does not consider disabled women in its programs, plans and policies, and does not promulgate laws to protect disabled women and ensure all their rights.

As a result of all this deprivation, marginalization, rejection,

derision and humiliation the disabled woman has no self confidence, is isolated and does not ask for her rights, is incapable of joining society and prefers to remain unnoticed.

Until three years ago, the situation of the disabled woman in Yemen looked set to continue along these lines. Nowadays, there is some interest given that some organizations joined with the government to prepare programs and issue various regulations to improve the state of the disabled woman and her image in society.

Even if a number of disabled Yemeni women have acquired most of their rights to study and work, etc., this does not mean that they represent a majority. They are still a minority, which we hope will become a majority, as we hope that the disabled woman will gain all her rights, and mainly her right to be acknowledged as a human being with all a human being's rights and obligations.

The Draft Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is about:

- *Dignity.*
- *Freedom of choice.*
- *Independence.*
- *Non-discrimination.*
- *Full inclusion.*
- *Participation.*
- *Respect of difference.*
- *Acceptance of disability.*
- *Equality of opportunity.*

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/ahcwgreport.htm>