

The Life Experiences of Twenty-One Women who Challenged Disability

■ Jahda Abou Khalil

Studies related to disability in the Arab world are still limited and studies concerned with the status of disabled women are nearly non-existent. In order to fill the void I have conducted research work covering the experiences of 21 women with disability in seven Arab countries. By analyzing the living history of these women the study aims at deciphering the actual life conditions of women with disability in the Arab world. The objective is to highlight the areas of oppression and opportunities available to disabled Arab women in comparison with women with disability worldwide.

The study aims at enriching other people's awareness of this issue through unveiling the factual conditions of disabled women in the Arab region. It also aims at obliterating all misconceptions about them. For this reason, the study intends to spread knowledge about this matter to a wider audience who should know about the potentials and capacities of these women.

This study was conducted in November 2001. The research commences by touching on women writers who depicted the conditions of disabled women, and how other women activists view them. Discussions also tackled some literary works about this issue written by dis-

abled women who are quite active and concerned about this matter. These women were able to stir up the issue of the disabled woman and nudge it to attention.

The study tackles the experiences of 21 disabled women in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Twelve of these women suffer from physical disability, one woman suffers from a hearing problem, another suffers a compound disability (blindness and mobility), and the other seven women are blind.

The research also included the various aspects of these women's lives and emphasized the most striking challenges and complexities they have encountered, as well as the ways they adopted to confront and overcome these obstacles. Also mentioned are the times of successful achievements, and those of casual failures. The research names those who offered assistance and support to these disabled women, knowing that some of them never got any aid, yet managed to attain prominent posts through their own potential.

The first section of the study presents synopses of interviews held with the above-mentioned women wherein they relate their experiences. The second section contains

the synthesis of the conclusions reached by the research as well as a display of the results of the questionnaires distributed to disabled women, followed by the final conclusions of the research.

Case 1: Ramona Sfeir, Lebanon

She suffers from an obscure malfunction in her immune system, which led to damaging her muscles. What attracts our attention in Ramona's case is her philosophy regarding her disability, which led her to discover how to benefit from her situation and build up herself as a citizen with rights and duties. For that reason, Ramona decided either to be or not to be, and eventually, she refused to equate her existence to her non-existence. She longed to leave behind a positive trace in this life, and that was the aim that urged her not to surrender. Ramona's experience taught her to be fully aware, and to understand that a disabled child is not responsible for his disability, and that it is essential that every family should train their children to respect all disabled persons. Ramona's pure character is revealed through her incessant strife. She says that her spirit will keep on growing until it outgrows this tight shirt and tears it to elevate and roam in the realm of the unlimited spirit where there is no grief, sighing, or pain.

Case 2: Ibtisam Abatha, Egypt

Her case reveals to us her ability to confront difficulties probably because she became blind during her teenage years. She finished her studies at the University of Cairo – Division of Philosophy and Psychology. Ibtisam views others with an eye of love and respect because she considers that a human being is not the sole fabricator of himself, but his circumstances place him in one mood or another. She feels that she possesses the ability to succeed and bear responsibility, and considers that life has given her more than she deserves. This feeling is attributed to her faith in God who gives people more than they deserve. Ibtisam also considers that her husband played an essential role in her life since he was always there to participate in her mental development and family construction.

Case 3: Omaima Abu Shuwsha, Palestine

She suffers from compound disability: visual and mobility. In spite of her disability her parents helped her to overcome her situation. She has a Degree in Special Education and Psychology. She is also a committed activist in promoting and caring for disability rights as she believes that this is a case that she has to defend. Omaima's disability

contributed to her failure and suffering in love relations. Her lover did not adopt a protective attitude about his beloved, which left her with a deep wound.

Case 4: Jammala Al-Bidany, Yemen

She holds a Diploma in Disability. She is polio victim, but worse, she suffered from her parents' neglect and carelessness about her health; however, her grandmother looked after her. Jammala's father's harsh behavior affected her life since he did not act toward her as a loving, caring father, nor did her brothers, who did not manifest any brotherly bond regarding her. Consequently, Jammala had to start work at the age of 15, which aided in overcoming some obstacles about her disability. She also worked arduously in looking for disabled persons who are rejected in their homes, and helped in getting them out of that situation. She even defended the right of the disabled to learn, and played a major role in getting the authorities to issue a decree in 1999-2000 protecting this right. She wishes to be a mother with no limits and be responsible for every disabled child. As for her ambitions, Jammala dreams of becoming a member of parliament in order for her to defend the cause of the marginalized disabled people.

Case 5: Rola El-Helou, Lebanon

She suffers from paraplegia. She holds a university Degree in Arabic Language and Literature. Rola dealt with her disability with full confidence and acceptance owing to the ample assistance she received from her parents. Her sister and brothers also accepted her case and helped her. This overwhelming support armed her with consistent courage and the ability to confront her reality since she believes that he who tries to forget reality is a weak person, whereas the one who accepts it is strong. Assertiveness found its way to her so as not to seclude herself in the corner, and she adopted the motto: "I will destroy anyone who tries to destroy me." Rola is obviously independent because she makes her decisions by herself. She faced difficulties when she tried to enter the Lebanese University for there were no building facilities or equipment especially designed for disabled persons. However, with her friends' assistance she overcame these difficulties. Rola played an effective role in rehabilitating and furnishing the UNESCO Palace. Her ambition is to write a poetry book. Rola failed in her love life since, as she put it, her disability pushes guys away. However, she never gives up and believes that through courage and audacity she can

attain her goals, and that through her mind and intelligence she can achieve a great deal. Her motto in life is: "I need the others as much as the others need me."

Case 6: Rowaida Diab, Palestine

She suffers from infantile paralysis/ polio. She holds a Degree in Accounting and Business Administration. Rowaida faced problems with the school equipment and building facilities. She suffered from the hatred of some teachers who could not understand her situation. Rola also suffered from other people's opinion about her despite her parents' consistent encouragement. Since she is remarkably unswerving and hardworking, Rola established fruitful contacts with prominent institutions. On the love side of her life, Rola failed, and consequently did not get married to the one she wanted, and so she marked that as one of her failures in life. Her ambition has no ceiling. Finishing her studies tops all her priorities in life, and this prompts her to progress.

Case 7: Rima al-Khatib, Lebanon

She is deaf, but her parents accepted and dealt with her situation with tender loving care. In The Institute for Audio Phonetique Reeducation (IRAP), Rima found herself in her second home and with a bigger family. Her disability created no hurdle for her as she managed to become a mother of two girls and one boy. Rima appears to be very well integrated yet she cannot see herself outside the world of the deaf. She is married to a hearing person and instead of taking her to his world he was driven to hers.

Case 8: Saiida Housny, Egypt

She is blind and holds a Ph.D. in History. What is unique about her case is that despite remaining illiterate until the age of 16, Saiida succeeded in attaining the highest degrees, which reveals her struggle and persistence. She did not fall for any potential lover because she poured her heart into her education, and so refused to burden herself with love and all its nightmares. Her greatest love was devoted to her scientific achievement and her Ph.D. Saiida encountered difficulties with reading and writing, and transportation, but she managed to overcome all these with the assistance of others.

Case 9: Sana' Kawly, Syria

She is a polio victim. She holds a Degree in Biology, and she also studied art on her own. During her stay in hospital for treatment she suffered health problems which augmented her psy-

chological suffering. Sana' fell in love with a painter for 16 years, but she never got married to him. He made her endure beyond limits, which led her into a psychological crisis. Now Sana' lives a psychologically stable life with her husband. She sometimes denies her disability as she feels it is shackling her.

Case 10: Sawsan Shalaby, Jordan

She suffers from infantile paralysis. She holds a Diploma in Nursing. The fact that she is a disabled woman bothered her to a great extent, but she then overcame it with the belief that with her will, she could achieve any goal. Sawsan never felt love towards her mother who used to differentiate her from her brothers. Her ability to overcome her handicap is quite obvious in her marriage to a disabled young man in a wheel chair. Sawsan is now a mother of four children.

Case 11: Sabah Hreish, Yemen

She became blind at the age of 19. She believes that her blindness is a divine act since she was able to get rid of her previous, oppressive, tyrant husband. Sabah's disability deprived her of reading, which she always loved, but with the assistance of her friends, she was later able to read and write in Braille. Sabah faced a basic difficulty with her instructor at the university when he forbade her to continue her studies as he thought that she was unable to do so; but nothing is impossible for a persistent person such as Sabah who is still continuing her studies in Psychology. The blindness she suffered from has turned into light through her new marriage and the child she is expecting.

Case 12: Aida Al-Shaishany, Jordan

She suffers from quadriplegia. She is a clerk at the Ministry of Labor in Jordan. Aida used to feel that she had been a burden to her family, but her family exerted all effort to encourage her and help her restore her ambitions in life. She got married to a disabled person, but then got divorced. Becoming an introvert nourished her belief that she could live on her own, and she did. She lived alone, drove her own car, and got her own job.

Case 13: Azza Mohammad Ali, Egypt

She suffers from motor cerebral palsy. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature. Azza was deprived of her mother owing to her parents' divorce. She did not have the chance to establish good relations with them. She failed to get married and have a family, and is now trying to compensate through

working with children whom she loves as though they were her own.

Case 14: Ghada Hasan, Jordan

She is blind, and holds a Master's Degree in English Literature. Despite her disability, Ghada does not feel she had a different childhood. She did everything children do with the help of her parents. Ghada loves challenges and adventures, and she believes that it is her duty to work on altering other people's attitudes. She adopted challenge as a principle not a personal attitude. Ghada encountered various forms of challenge and attitudes, but she always proved to others that she possesses high potential and is able to succeed.

Case 15: Fatima Al-Akel, Yemen

She is blind, and holds a Degree in Philosophy and a Diploma in Islamic Studies. Fatima scored numerous scientific achievements, and she owes this to her persistence and refusal to surrender to her disability. Being well off has helped her to attain some posts, whereas on the sentimental level, she failed to get committed to the one she wanted. But the idea of motherhood still lingers in her mind. Her father played a major role in her life.

Case 16: Leila Atshan, Palestine

She is blind, but her parents' intensive passion helped her overcome her handicap. She holds a Master's Degree in Psychological and Social Sciences. She worked as a psychological and social advisor for immigrants from Denmark. Leila's ambition is to open doors to the Arab world to share humane awareness-raising as this is her vocation. She also feels that it is everyone's duty to work for all human beings.

Case 17: Mounira Bin Hindi, Bahrain

The posts that Mounira, a polio victim, has occupied are enough evidence of her ambitions and defiance of her disability. She is the Head of Mobility International in Bahrain and General Manager of Children's Gardens whose aim is to integrate physically disabled children. She is also a member of the Higher Council of the National Institution for Disabled Services, and the Head of the National Committee for Providing Work for the Disabled, and the Vice President of the Arab Organization of Disabled People. She also works as a Coordinator and Training Specialist at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Mounira was entirely supported by her family, which helped enable her to integrate into society despite the

general trend of casting pity on the disabled. The support of Mounira's parents is what stands out in her case.

Case 18: Najah Al-Awabdy, Syria

She was born with physical defects. She did not attend school because of her parents who did not accept her disability. She did not even leave home until the age of 15. Her first outing was to partake in her First Communion at church. By this outing, the society around her created a new shock for her, which made her stay home again. She learnt how to read and write by herself, and was able to finish her Brevet degree at home. She is computer literate, but her father did not help her progress in this field despite her love for learning; instead, he cared only for her brothers' education. Najah experienced difficult situations in her private life at home where they viewed her disability as shameful, and thus rejected her case. This has reflected negatively on her educational, social, and love life.

Case 19: Nada Al-Azzaz from Lebanon

Though blind, Nada finished her MA in Sociology. She now works at a bank in Lebanon, but her individuality and seclusion in living alone at home prove her willingness to shun society and rely on herself despite being robbed twice. Nada's parents played a vital role by granting her confidence and unlimited freedom. Her mother was her pressing incentive that urged Nada to live her life like any other normal girl.

Case 20: Nahla Ghandour, Lebanon

She is a polio victim. Her family treated her with profound care and love, and so she was able to finish a Degree in Computer Science. Now she works as Director of a center for rehabilitating children who suffer from EMC. She is also specialized in occupational therapy for disabled children. Nahla failed in her marriage; her husband used to beat her and swear at her, which augmented her disability problem. This issue had the strongest impact on her, but her son and daughter were her incentive to prove her motherhood. Nahla is an incessant researcher into the affairs of paralyzed children, and she always tries her best to utilize her ambition to improve children's situations.

Case 21: Heba Hagrass, Egypt

She suffers from a mobility disability. She holds an MA in Sociology in issues related to gender, disability and marriage. She is a Member of the Executive Committee of the Arab Organization of Disabled People. Heba passed her university peri-

od trying to integrate into the society. She has a successful marriage life with her cousin and they have a son and a daughter. She and her husband view the disabled as human beings, and so succeeded in rearing their children on the sound mentality they have. In this experience, we should not forget the role of Heba's mother in supporting her daughter psychologically, and also her father who supported her educationally. Having the twin support of her parents, Heba could launch herself in this life just like any other girl.

In the second section of this research, the study displays the results of the questionnaires, which posed 15 questions about disabled Arab women. In a conclusive summary it is detected that the signs of empowerment and their elements emerge through the personal ability of each woman to confront persecution added to a combination of factors that help in the success or the failure of the experience.

A collection of factors aided in creating the incentive and empowerment that led to success, and enforced the power of the ego in each of these disabled women. The most effective of those factors are the parents, brothers, sisters, the husband, and the financial status, in addition to the constant care and follow up of organizations of disabled people and rehabilitation institutions.

The research shows that the primary promoter of the drive towards empowerment is the deep feeling inside each disabled person to live with dignity and independence. That constitutes the main driving force to cross over oppression towards self-achievement on both the personal and social levels. Even though this situation is similar in the case of both male and female disabled persons, the case of women with disability in general and in the Arab world in particular poses a stronger challenge of facing the double discrimination of disability and gender.

كل نسبة بتعمل فرق والإرادة بتعمل تغيير

EVERY PERCENT COUNTS
OUR SPIRIT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

كل نسبة بتعمل فرق والإرادة بتعمل تغيير

3%  

Implement the 3% quota provision in law no. 22
تنفيذ المادة 17 من القانون رقم 22 لسنة 2000م
مجلس التعاون الخليجي

HIRE THE DISABLED
وظفوا المعوقين

Towards Social, Economic Integration And Equal Opportunities
تتبع احتياجات الدمج الاجتماعي والاقتصادي وثباتها في الحرم