

# The Situation of Visually Impaired Women in the Arab World

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One of the difficulties confronting researchers working on the situation of the disabled in any country of the Arab world is the lack of data and statistics. Visual impairment is a unique kind of disability given that people suffering from such a disability are the least in number. Moreover, because it is a sensory disability this makes it complex in nature. It is a disability that has serious impacts on all aspects of life: the educational, the rehabilitational, the social, the cultural, the economic, and so on. The interrelation of these aspects leads to the lack of understanding of the needs of this group.

The gap in understanding the problems of this disability has also resulted in formulating strategies and plans which are not in the interests or ambitions of the visually impaired and have contributed to and deepened their isolation in society.

Any plan or strategy should target granting equal opportunities to the visually impaired at all levels of society for them to achieve equal participation and integration afterwards. The term visual impairment in this paper includes the blind and partially sighted.

The situation of visually impaired women in any society is like carving in stone as they are doubly discriminated against – first for being disabled and secondly for being women. This article will concentrate on the aspects of education and rehabilitation as these factors affect the other levels of life such as the social, the employment and the cultural. The new trend in the Arab world – and all over the world – is to adopt an inclusive education system as a means to educate the visually impaired. This sudden transferring approach from the specialized institutional service providers to an inclusive education system has created obstacles and difficulties for the visually impaired in general, and for women in particular.

Such a statement needs to be proved and this requires a thorough presentation of the philosophy of inclusive education and the strategy of its application in our schools for us to reach the conclusion that adopting any new strategy in education requires a study of all factors involved. The suc-

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cess of an experiment in any country does not necessarily mean that the same result is to be over-generalized as each country has its specific circumstances.

### **Visually Impaired Girls and the Inclusive Education System**

An inclusive education system is the vehicle to the best education and rehabilitation models to be offered to the disabled – even those with sensory disabilities including the visually impaired – as it leads to them being fully integrated in society at all levels. This system grants the disabled equality. Inclusive education is defined as granting education to all in order for them to obtain the skills that would lead them to achieve equality and full participation in society.

In the light of this definition the following remarks provoke contemplation:

1. The percentage of illiteracy among women in the Arab world is 52%. A simple question imposes itself here: What would be the rate of illiteracy amongst visually impaired women?
2. Education is not compulsory in all developing countries and laws are not strict with those families that deprive their disabled members – especially girls – of their right to a proper education.
3. Governments adopt the model of inclusive education to reduce the financial budget granted to the disabled through specialist institutions. The disabled will be integrated without extra financial burden as the number of those integrated will be greater. In this way the governments would avoid the criticism directed at them of serving a very limited percentage of the disabled.
4. Integration in regular schools takes place without prior preparation of the physical environment, the community of teachers and students, the adapted curricula, the proper training of the service providers and the recipients and without the awareness among the public of the nature of visual impairment, its capacities and limits. This strategy adopts the philosophy of the electric shock being the ideal treatment method.
5. Organizations for the blind are mostly marginalized and not involved in planning, monitoring and implementing any activity or project related to the visually impaired due to its failure to be the sole representative of the blind, regardless of their sex.
6. Visually impaired women are not represented in the body of the organization of the blind; accordingly their organizations cannot reflect, defend and enforce their interests, rights, ambitions and longings. Visually impaired women are not incorporated in their community of the blind so how can they be heard and supported by the other bodies of the community?
7. Society's discriminatory attitudes and approaches

lead to assisting the visually impaired male to obtain his basic right of education on the basis that he is the family's breadwinner, while depriving the visually impaired women of their right on the basis that they are no more than a catastrophe which has to be denied and struggled to be hidden to avoid the consequences of their existence in the community as a whole.

### **The Recurrent Scenario of the Process of Integrating Visually Impaired Girls into the Inclusive Education System**

A sighted guide leads the visually impaired girl to her classroom. Finally she reaches her destination. She is seated at her desk that is void of any Braille book or device. There is so much noise around her that she cannot make use of her hearing abilities. The noise is so loud and to her confusion the language of the dialogue between the teacher and the students is unknown to her as it is based on body language. Even the oral ability of the teacher is not utilized as the blackboard came to replace it. The bell rings for all students to move to grant their muscles relaxation but she remains in her place. Everybody is whispering, "A blind girl." She is excluded from all scientific subjects and from physical education lessons as well. The day is over and the sighted guide comes to pick up the blind girl who is still in her place as if she was growing there. She goes back home with a negative experience deciding not to go to school again or to continue her education. Her decision is supported by all those surrounding her – what would a blind girl get from education anyway? This scenario applies to the majority, while there is another scenario, which is rare. The blind girl is strengthened by a person or a group to confront these impossible circumstances. It is recorded that a female friend or the older sister or mother are the ones to assume this role. The journey of struggle starts not with the visually impaired girl but also with her supporters. She is to be guided to school daily, all educational materials are to be recorded for her on tapes. Her guide becomes the artery of her life. She or he interferes even in the way she looks and with whom she is to be acquainted. The result is total dependence on that sighted guide and guardian.

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### **The Consequences of this Model of Inclusive Education**

The impacts of such a model are catastrophic at all levels. The visually impaired girl will become dependent on an

external factor to make her life go on. She will become convinced that this is the limit of her abilities. She will lack the interest and the courage to compete with her sighted peers on the basis of her assumed shortcomings. She will accept anything offered to her to be a blessing not a right. She will sink in her darkness, depriving herself of her basic rights of being a female who has feelings, instincts, dreams and ambitions. Her lack of self-confidence and feeling of inferiority will lead her to isolate herself socially and psychologically. If she were studying in a school for the blind she would not realize this gap between herself and the others.

The application of this inclusive education experiment on her in this way played the role of deepening what it means to be a female and blind at the same time. The

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haphazard method of integration will not have its effect on the visually impaired female only but on society as well. The society we are pointing at comprises the students, the teachers, the families, the surroundings and the community as a whole. The sighted peers of the visually impaired female will view her as different. This considerable difference is attributed to the lack of the compensatory skills which could make up for her blindness.

The problem is not in that she studies in a different way but in the fact that she does not study approximately half of the subjects. She is not to study mathematics, chemistry, physics or biology. She is not even required to learn the sections with maps in geography. The educational level of the visually impaired girl in relation to the accumulation of knowledge of sighted girls does not reach more than 30% of the competence of her sighted peers. The gap would not only be in educational knowledge but also in the comprehension of the concept of the self. The visually impaired female denies her body and its needs, the importance of feeling and behaving as a female. Her family, school teachers and friends will always view her as a child. Accordingly, she cannot have anything in common with the other students as she is not at the same level as them educationally- and nature-wise as a female.

Under the circumstances of this unplanned integration teachers possess very low educational expectations of the visually impaired girls, therefore, whatever they acquire is excellent and more than enough. They are kind and extremely humane and understanding to have accepted

such difficult cases without any training or extra financial incentives. Society as a whole will combine to maintain the preconceived ideas, the discriminatory attitudes and the misconceptions about visually impaired persons in general and blind girls and women in particular.

This study is not meant to attack the inclusive education system, but to highlight its destructiveness for visually impaired girls in case it is not applied in the proper way.

The following steps and measures are recommended to ensure the complete and proper integration of visually impaired girls in an inclusive education system:

- Requiring all hospitals, clinics and other health/medical centers to register the birth of visually impaired girls, or cases of visually impaired girls/women visiting the medical centers for treatment, aiming at having correct statistics of the number of visually impaired females to offer them their basic right of education.
- Increasing compulsory education for the disabled in general and visually impaired girls in particular from the primary stages to the secondary to ensure literacy among this group. Laws must enforce this by imposing penalties on those families violating this direction.
- Approaching governments to allocate funds to improve the standard of education for the disabled as a part of the developing program for the country.
- Strengthening the organizations of the blind to become the sole representative of the rights and interests of the visually impaired people in the country whether they are living in rural areas or cities, and regardless of them being male or female – i.e. a strong organization of the blind covering the whole country serving both sexes justly.
- Strengthening the presence of visually impaired women in the body of the organization of the blind on the executive board and different committees. This representation must be strong at the level of the headquarters and local branches as well. This could be implemented through imposing a quota for women's representation and for the visually impaired women elected to take on the responsibility of recruiting other such women for the democratic process to be applied literally in the end. These visually impaired women will form the pressure group at the level of the organization and hence in the community to ensure the best education for visually impaired girls and women.
- Establishing channels through joint committees between the organization of the blind and the Ministry of Education in the country concerned to

ensure the input of the visually impaired in planning, monitoring and implementing any inclusive education program related to integrating visually impaired girls.

- Establishing resource centers all over the country with a close connection to the organization of the blind to offer the best services to the target group. These resource centers will carry out the mission of ensuring the best application and implementation of the integration of visually impaired girls within regular schools under the system of inclusive education. These centers would play the following roles:

- Working in close connection with the organization of the blind, which, after recruiting women members is to transfer them to these centers where they can receive psychological consultancy and support. The psychologist in this resource center will help the visually impaired female to gain self-confidence and belief in her abilities. She will be enlightened about how to accept herself as a female and then as a blind female. She is to be prepared psychologically to face all the components of integration into regular school. She will be equipped with the psychological tools that will enable her to struggle and be patient until she gains her basic right to education. The visually impaired girl must realize that in addition to the psychological tools there are educational and rehabilitation ones which she has to acquire to achieve equality with her female friends. She has to learn the techniques of using the white cane to be independent with regard to mobility. She will understand that by using the white cane she will go to school alone, visit her friends and run her life freely like any sighted person. She will like the fact that she will have her own private life. She will also undergo training for daily living skills. These skills will deepen her concept of self. She is to learn how to take care of herself as a female whose body requires special care. Besides taking care of herself she is to take care of her home by being a source of help to the family. In this way she will gain respect and acceptance from her family members. She is to learn Braille, which is the means and the vehicle to literacy. Our visually impaired girl is also to learn how to deal with all kinds of abuses – whether verbal or physical. More than that, she is to receive lessons on sex education to confront the world as a female.
- Partially sighted girls/women and those threatened with losing their sight can also benefit from this center as they can receive social and psychological support. The visually impaired female is now ready to face the outside world, the world that is unknown to her, but she at least has an idea about it and has the tools to deal with its realities.

- This center – in cooperation with the organization of the blind – is to approach the families of the visually impaired girls through social workers and visually impaired women whose existence on the team would convince the families to believe in the abilities of their girls as a concrete example if a successful visually impaired woman is present. The process is to take place through visits, seminars, lectures and training workshops. The families of the visually impaired females are to be involved in the process of rehabilitation. This strategy will grant the rehabilitation process strength and sustainability. Many visually impaired females in the Arab world were trained to use the white cane, but they have never utilized this training as their families are in total rejection of such a practice. This is attributed to the fact that they were not involved in the process from the beginning.
- The resource center we are referring to is to train the teachers working with visually impaired girls before integration and after it. The training must be comprehensive and continuous. The classroom teacher must be in close contact with the resource center to sort out any problem that arises. The training must comprise of basic blindness issues. The classroom teacher is to be supported by the visiting teacher and the consultant.
- It is the responsibility of the resource center to provide the necessary equipment and the curricula adapted into the proper format, whether Braille or large print. This is not all, as all educational means must be supplied by this center. A Braille library would also be important for literacy. This center will not be for serving visually impaired females only so it would be realistic if gender issues were taken into consideration – especially in certain cultures where mixing with males is not common. A separate place for girls to get training, to read, or to chat with their friends would be beneficial for families who would otherwise not allow their visually impaired girls to visit this center.
- This center is to coordinate with the organization of the blind on how to disseminate knowledge and information to the society regarding blindness, its nature and capacities. This role is of utmost importance to visually impaired females who could suffer from the discriminatory attitudes and the misconceptions of society about their abilities and potentials.

This paper is not written to reject the inclusive education system as an ideology, but to highlight its destructiveness on visually impaired girls in case it is not carefully and properly planned.