

Women with Disability and Employment in Egypt

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In everyday life employment is the most crucial issue to human lives. As Baron et al. (1998) has quoted Willis in saying:

"Properly to understand unemployment, we need to understand what is missing – the wage. The wage is not simply an amount of money... it is the only connection with other social possibilities, processes and desirable things. As such it operates as a crucial pivot for several other processes, social and cultural transmissions quite unlike itself." (Willis cited in Shakespeare, Ed., 1998, p.95).

Like everyone else persons with disabilities are in need of work because work gives status and value to the person. Work provides economic security and independence. Most of all work gives purpose to life (ILO 1995). It is a way to properly integrate men and women with disabilities and make them participate in social activities, which results in their better acceptance in the community and society (Hagrass 1998).

In reality people with disabilities are greatly suffering from being unable to gain their livelihoods from proper employment and are typically forced to depend on

their families or relatives or to resort to begging to meet their financial needs. In April 2000, the employment issue of people with disability took top priority in parliamentary debates. A number of members of parliament received letters from families of people with disability who had committed suicide because they had been waiting for employment for more than ten years.¹ These debates revealed the astonishing lapse of the government in failing to monitor the employment of people with disability in accordance with the 5% quota in the public and private sectors as stipulated in Law 39 of 1975. There is a sizeable number of persons with disability in need of employment. Indeed, they are among the most marginalized groups in the labor market. Only 500 persons with disability gained employ-

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ment in the year 2000 out of 12,000 in need of work². The number of women with disabilities in need of employment in these figures is expected to be higher as will be revealed later.

In Egypt, people with disabilities face tremendous difficulties in getting employed in the open labor market. A very limited number manage to attain employment and fewer manage to sustain it³. This paper is intended to investigate the situation of women with disability and employment: and the reasons for their being regarded as undesirable employment candidates. Another major objective of this paper is to suggest ways to improve the employability of women with disabilities as a political, civil and social right.

The issue at hand cannot be divorced from the major unemployment problem from which Egypt has long suffered (Abdel-Khalek 2002; Fergany 2002). According to the Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC), the unemployment rate for the year 2001 is 9.1%⁴. Other figures given by the CIA (American Central Intelligence Agency) estimate the unemployment rate in Egypt at 12% for the year 2001⁵. From the wide discrepancy

between both figures, one can see that the state is trying to conceal part of the unemployment problem although 9% is not a small figure in itself. Hence, the unemployment of persons with disabilities is part of this problem. Needless to say, to deal with a part means to deal with the whole unemployment problem. However, for the purpose of this paper our discussion will be limited to the situation of people with disabilities – particularly women with disability – in employment.

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Social Attitudes Towards People with Disabilities

The major problems facing people with disabilities are related to social attitudes which affect many of the social activities people with disability need to take part in. According to my MA research several women participants complained about the following attitudes and prejudices which are affecting their proper integration into society and leading to their exclusion from mainstream society with all its activities.

Through the accounts of several participants, one can see vividly what Murphy calls “the invisibility of the people with disabilities.” As Murphy puts it:

there is deep and uneasy ambivalence in relations between the able-bodied and the disabled... people look [at] the disabled as an “alien species”, they cannot anticipate his/her reactions; the disabled individual falls outside the hem of normal expectations, and the able-bodied are left not knowing what to say to him or her. One way out of the dilemma is to refrain from establishing any contact at all. (1990:166)

Furthermore, Oliver and Shakespeare state that these anxieties result in the exclusion of the person with a disability from their social surrounding. (Oliver 1990; Shakespeare et al. 1996).

Another aspect of these negative social attitudes is that people with disabilities are stigmatized because of their disability. Stigma refers to an attribute or attributes that are deeply discrediting (Goffman 1963). Stigma includes people surrounding the stigmatized person, therefore, the husband of a woman with disabilities, the daughter of a criminal, the parents of a mentally retarded person, the friend of a blind person are all sharing the stigma of this person but to different degrees. As Goffman puts it, stigma spreads “in waves but of diminishing intensity” (1963; Susman 1994). Thus stigma is a perception generated in a social encounter which differentiates between two persons on the basis of their ability or disability (Goffman 1963). Such a perception may result in the encapsulation of a person with a disability by his parents to avoid feelings of shame and stigma (Goffman 1963). Thus the feelings of the person with a disability and his/her needs are not considered in this case which leads to his/her feelings of inferiority, humiliation, unworthiness and vulnerability.

The apparent physical deviation from the ideals of beauty makes women with disabilities undesirable. People in almost all societies and cultures have been affected by the standards of beauty recently set by the West. Even clothing and other adornments have become more connected to one’s social identity especially for women (Scheper-Hughes 1984; Al-Sabbah 1984; Simon 1988; Walther 1993). Marwa has been given a job in a pharmaceutical company, under Law 39 which mandates employing 5% of people with disabilities in any organization of more than 50 employees (El Banna 1989; Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs 1987). When she went to work for the first few weeks her boss kept assigning difficult tasks to her to prove that she is not fit to work. But when Marwa insisted on going to work he asked her to stay at home and he would give her her salary every month without going to work. Marwa explains that by saying: “he does not like my looks.” As a result, Marwa decided to accept his offer and “get rid

of his face" as she said and at the same time go and work among her people in the sheltered workshop at Al Nour Wa El-Amal Institute.

The unblemished look of the women is so important that many of my participants report hearing such comments as "the beautiful is never complete," and "what a waste."

Amal L. and her sightless sister are a good example of the family fear of social shame of having a child with a disability as well as the fear the parents have of the thought that their child with disability could suffer from sexual abuse. The two girls were denied any sort of education because education for the sightless was in a boarding school, which her parents refused as they were Upper Egyptians (Sa'ida). They were afraid someone would take advantage of them because they were sightless. After her two brothers married and her two sighted sisters married, and the death of her parents, Amal L. recalls staying at home doing housework. She said: "the lives of my sisters changed, every few days they had an event or something happened, but I was there with nothing changing." So she decided that she wanted to go to the Institute. She asked for her doctor's help. The doctor tried to convince her family but in vain. They were afraid people would find it shameful to send her away after her parents' death. However, after long negotiations, they agreed to let her go. Amal L. believes that she never could have made it to the Institute if her parents were still alive.

All these items and ideals became the passport for success, social integration, and economic achievement (Murphy 1990). Where employment is involved, many companies and organizations consider physical appearance a requirement either explicitly or implicitly. When it comes to hiring women, beauty is considered an important asset (Murphy 1995). As a result, many companies refrain from hiring people with disabilities especially in positions dealing with customers or with the public for fear of offending their clients by the physical appearance of the person with disability.

Thus the separation of women with disabilities from the mainstream of social life also results in their inability to perform natural social relationships with the rest of the community. This leads to their exclusion from main social arenas leading to their deprivation from social institutions such as marriage. This widens the gap between people with disabilities and their society and obstructs their social integration.

Employment as a Constitutional Right

To be able to investigate the effects of impairment and its

disabling conditions on the employment of people with disabilities, they must be viewed within their broader structure in which they operate and acquire their meanings. It is worth emphasizing that elements operate within specific social, political and economic systems or structures, which gives them their meanings, functions and roles.

Employment is the main concern of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). It is a political right to all Egyptian citizens, as stated in Article 13 of the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt (Edition 8 1999:3), which states:

Work is a right, a duty and an honor that the state guarantees... (Trans. is mine).

Therefore, MOM is also responsible for the employment of all individuals with disabilities in Egypt. According to the Rehabilitation Law 39 for the year 1975 and its amendment:

All private employers who employ 50 employees or more and fall under Legislation no. 137 of year 1981 for employment, whether they operate in one area or one country or in dispersed places, are required to employ disabled persons nominated to them by Manpower offices according to their registers. This is done according to 5% of the number of employees working in that unit. This rule applies to all branches of the company. However, employers can fill the quota without the nomination of the Manpower Office on one condition, which is to register their disabled employees in the Manpower Office register. In all cases, any firm which employs a disabled person must send a notification letter to their specified Manpower Office (art. 9). A 5% quota has been specified for disabled people holding their rehabilitation certificates out of the total number of employees in each unit of the establishment. This also applies to the state and public sector and organizations. It is to be specified for disabled persons who have received a rehabilitation certificate 5% of the total number the employees in each of the units of the

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managerial of the state, its public organizations, and public sector ... (art. 10) (Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs 1987: 5). (Trans. is mine).

If this law is violated the person in charge is subjected to a fine or imprisonment (art. 16). Upon rehabilitation or receiving an academic degree, the persons with disabilities are registered in a special register in the Offices for the Employment of the Persons with Disability in the Ministry of Manpower. Then they are distributed according to the quota (Qandil 1989; Gad 2002).

Legislation versus Implementation

In reality, there is a big gap between legislation and implementation. The most recent figures for 2001 provided by Gad, a labor researcher in the Ministry of Manpower, shows that from among 23,046 persons with disabilities registered in the various Manpower offices all over the country, only 2343 have been employed. This means less than 10% of the number registered have been employed⁶. It should be taken into consideration that not all persons with disability of employment age are registered with Manpower. However, Gad has tried to make a rough estimate of the size of the problem. Assuming that Egypt follows World Health Organization (WHO) estimates of 10% of the population being disabled – six million are present – yet she calculates that only 0.04% are included in mainstream employment which is a shocking percentage that calls for serious attention. Unfortunately there are no separate figures for women with disability at that stage but it is expected to be worse than those for men for many reasons explained below.

Reasons for the Unemployment and Underemployment of People with Disabilities

Furthermore, Gad has identified a number of major reasons for people with disability being unemployed and underemployed. One is that many private organizations refuse to hire persons with disability and prefer to pay the fine of L.E. 100 every now and then, which is very little money⁷. There are not enough jobs offered in government and the public sector to accommodate the large number of people with disability who prefer to work there, as the environment is less hostile than other employment sectors. The weak commitment of the responsible parties to fill the quota is because they are more committed to solving the problem of unemployment of the non-disabled persons. This raises the issue of the type of citizenship a person with disability has. The difficulty in taking any serious action against governmental units if they are below quota or if they unjustly fire an employee with a disability is really a big problem. The law states that action should be taken against the responsible person, who is in that case the minister, him/herself. All

this demonstrates how lenient the law is with these people and how inconsiderate its relation to people with disability (Gad 2002).

Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that there is a very high drop out from employment among the employees with disabilities for various reasons (Gad 2002). First the physical barriers at home, streets... etc. and in the workplace prevent the person with a disability from normalizing his/her life (Hahn 1988; Gad 2002). Also, the transport limitations prevent the person with disability from reaching their workplaces safely and within reasonable cost. The inaccessibility of the workplace to people with disability is another major barrier. Many people with disabilities find it very difficult to handle the work situation because no alterations have been made to meet their needs. Low wages and the inhospitable environment by which the people with disability are met also drives them more out of work. Thus, the person with disability is further disabled in his/her job opportunities and gains.

All the above mentioned weak points in the law and the mentioned reasons for people with disability to drop out are the major concern of this research which will be investigated through comprehensive fieldwork to cover all aspects of the problem.

The Situation of Women with Disabilities

Women with disabilities are in a worse position because of their gender and their disability. This double prejudice is the root of the inferior status of women with disabilities, making them the world's most disadvantaged group (Boylan 1991).

In Egypt, as in many other developing countries, rehabilitation services and special education schools are male-oriented and totally inadequate in meeting the needs of the female half of the population of people with disabilities. As rehabilitation centers and special schools are usually located in main cities, girls and women with disabilities are unable to travel that far because of the immobility imposed on their gender and because of parental overprotection in such societies. Parents feel that they should exercise more protection over girls with disabilities as they are perceived as helpless and as an easy target for abuse (Boylan 1991). This curtails the chances of a girl being rehabilitated and/or educated either in her traditional gender role or in vocational occupations. Thus, these girls and women are neither capable of practicing household routines nor capable of working outside their homes. As a result they are excused from some of their obligations and denied their rights, needs and desires. In this way women with disabilities lose their social status and are forced into social isolation behind doors (Nosseir 1990). Without being trained or educated to perform an

income generating job the women become totally financially dependent on their families and relatives which results in their further degradation.

A number of statistics and percentages clarify the enormity of the neglect of women with disability and their maximum marginalization either in health services or in rehabilitation. Figures show that the illiteracy rate among Egyptian men with disabilities ten years and over reaches 51.9%, while the illiteracy rate among Egyptian women with disabilities ten years and over reaches 79%. Employment among Egyptian men with disabilities fifteen years and over reaches 65.9% while the percentage of Egyptian women with disabilities is only 13% (Nosseir 1989). This shows the very meager education and employment opportunities that these women have compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, there is an urgent need to relocate or establish new rehabilitation centers as closely as possible to all the people with disabilities, especially women. However, the high cost of such projects is an obstacle in developing countries such as Egypt because of the scarce resources and the low priority allocated to them (Nosseir 1990).

Conclusion

Although many problems of disability have usually been presented as an inevitable outcome of the impairment of people with disabilities, my research indicates that the major problems are the outcomes of individual and social prejudicial attitudes and not personal traits. Having gone through many of the reasons resulting in the marginalization of women with disabilities, what is now needed is a framework that could help resolve some of the above mentioned problems. Many of the necessary solutions are applicable to people with disabilities in general since women with disabilities can not be divorced from the main body of people with disabilities.

In developing countries, labor laws are outdated, limited in scope and are male biased. They do not include modern forms of employment, news services and technologies and occupational hazards etc. and all these have effects on persons with disabilities and women in particular. Egypt suffers from all the above. The International Labor Organization (ILO) urges governments to revise their labor policies and amend them to widen their scopes, add anti-discriminatory provisions and increase penalties to whoever acts against these provisions. This legislation should take into account the needs of women workers with disability. It also should identify the gap between rural and urban areas in the same country (ILO 1995).

Education is one of the major needs of people with disabilities. Therefore it should be compulsory for all children

with disabilities whether males or females. Laws should be applied and strong penalties should be imposed to enforce them.

Rehabilitation and training are essential for children who cannot be educated in order to enable them to acquire some skills to get employed. New technologies should be available to facilitate various tasks for the children with disabilities. Also the integration of these children into ordinary schools should be done whenever possible to allow both disabled and non-disabled children to deal with each other in a normal environment and setting (Boylan 1991; Hagrass 1994).

Concerning employment, people with disabilities should be highly trained in skills that have a high market value. Suitable equipment must be provided to facilitate their job performance. The proper allocation of people with disabilities in their jobs and the elimination of difficulties related to accessibility and mobility in the workplace should be supervised by government personnel and work inspectors (Qandil 1989). Strong measures should be taken against employers who do not abide by the law of the employment of people with disabilities, not merely a fine of 100 pounds. It is worth noting that the Egyptian law of rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities is under serious revision to improve its implementation and to fill in its gaps. The role of organizations working in the field of disability to put pressure on decision makers to revise this law cannot be ignored.

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Policy makers should also be sensitized to the special accessibility needs of people with disabilities. For instance the distances people walk, the steps they climb, and the materials they read are a strain on persons with functional limitations. These discriminatory factors should be eliminated by bearing in mind a norm of inclusion instead of a norm of exclusion. Making streets, buildings and sidewalks accessible to people in wheelchairs takes their needs as the norm but does not exclude others. Indeed such renovations may be also beneficial to others like, for example, people with bicycles and parents with baby strollers. By thinking about the different others "we could make difference mean something new; we could make all the difference" (Minow 1994).

The media as a powerful tool in disseminating informa-

tion should be intelligently used. First it is important to increase social awareness toward the causes of disability and how to avoid it. Second, the role of the media in portraying positive images of persons with disabilities especially women should be examined. The need to provide role models to other persons with disabilities and to encourage social integration is important. The proper use of the media can make people get rid of traditional practices that are discriminatory. Depicting the person with a disability as not only a deviant body but as a whole integrated person (a mind and a body) is a way to make people accept and deal with the persons with disabilities as an integral part of society (Scheper-Hughes 1984).

It is obvious that any improvement in the social status of women in general is an improvement of the position of women with disabilities. However, these women should fight for themselves and not wait for other women to gain rights for them indirectly since they have additional vital needs. As Amal Ibrahim forcefully announced in a conference about the social integration of women with disabilities:

As a blind woman I can say that equality can not be achieved from one side. Therefore, women are not only to be educated and trained, but also have to be guided psychologically and socially to face all kinds of discrimination, difficulties and be as active as possible to prove their capabilities, since rights are to be taken and not given. (1994: 4)

As women's organizations are oblivious to the needs of women with disabilities, these organizations should be sensitized to their special problems. Hence they can incorporate the women with disabilities among them and include their needs with the needs of other women (cf. Moore 1990: 183-186; Carlsson 1997).

Women with disabilities must therefore organize themselves to make both the disability movements and the women's movements aware of their physical, psychological, and social demands. They should push their way through both movements for proper inclusion and refuse being marginalized (Blackwell-Stratton et al. 1988).

In Egypt, we should start to form organizations of⁸ people with disabilities instead of organizations for⁹ disabled people to be able to prioritize our needs and demand our rights instead of being only the recipients of charity (Morris 1991). Empowering people with disabilities by having group solidarity and forming pressure groups is of key importance. Thus, another target for these organizations is raising awareness of people with disabilities themselves, their families, and society to the rights of people with disabilities. (Oliver 1990). Women with dis-

abilities organizations should be formed having these concepts clear and emphasizing the gender aspect of the problem. Furthermore, as information is power, and as people with disabilities do not have enough of it, these organizations should also have special publications to communicate to their members new knowledge, new technologies, success stories, complaints, aspirations and politics (Shakespeare et al. 1996; Goffman 1963).

People with disabilities should find ways to penetrate "ideological state apparatuses" such as the media, schools, political parties, mosques and churches and the family, all of which are responsible for perpetuating and reinforcing dominant ideologies (Moore 1990). By doing so they could make people aware of the disability issue from the grassroots to high level state organizations. Furthermore, state apparatuses should enhance measures to change negative social attitudes towards women with disabilities in particular (Carlsson 1997).

Disability movements should be more politicized to be able to influence decision-making. As people with disabilities have voting rights, they could lobby and form pressure groups on certain parliamentary candidates. Also, as a minority group they should exert pressure to have their own representatives in parliament so that policies emerge bearing in mind the population of people with disabilities. They should also pressure the government to allocate more resources towards the health of people with disabilities, environmental and societal needs. In doing so, we are asserting our rights as citizens of this society and community (Morris 1991). Women with disabilities should be equal participants in all the above political decision-making processes (Carlsson 1997).

END NOTES

1. Live television transmission from parliament on 23rd April 2000.
2. Al Ahram: 24th April 2000.
3. *Ibid.*
4. <http://economic.idsc.gov.eg./book/laborhtm>. This is the central agency for information in Egypt.
5. These records are taken from the register of the Division of Care for the Disabled persons in the Ministry of Manpower.
6. Any figures for the number of people with disabilities in Egypt should be taken with care.
7. This is equal to \$20 or £12.50.
8. Organizations of: means that disabled people run their own organizations since they know their needs better. They focus on demanding rights.
9. Organizations for: are mostly elitist people's organizations made to help the poor and disadvantaged. They are mostly charity organizations.

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