

## Women with Disability:

# The Peculiarity

The question of "Women with Disability" is related to two subjects simultaneously. The first deals with the issue of women's rights whilst the other deals with the problem of disability and its impact on the identity of the person with a disability. Whereas the literature has lately become quite rich in research and articles about the condition of women and the different aspects of feminist strategies, accomplishments and the empowerment of women, the question of disabled women is still rare and very underdeveloped. As far as the Arab world is concerned, most of its literature deals with disability as a medical and rehabilitation issue given the fact that these writings are being presented by professionals working in the field. Accordingly, the concern of the disability movement is to turn disability into an international political issue to be dealt with at that level. The writing of some disabled people about their struggle has succeeded in getting disability seen as a socio-political issue very much related to a question of identity and citizen's rights. In fact, disability has passed through three main phases. Phase one goes back to the Middle Ages where disability was seen as a curse. Accordingly, it was considered part of the struggle between the forces of "Good and Evil" with disability being either the work of the devil or a symbol of God's punishment, treating disabled people at that time was based on religious rituals and myths. Foucault states that disabled people were confined to general hospitals alongside mad persons, the unemployed and all groups of people considered a threat by society.<sup>1</sup>

The advancement of science in general and of medical science in particular starting in the seventeenth century introduced a paradigmatic shift in dealing with disability. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the old religious paradigm on disability col-

lapsed to be replaced by a new one considering disability as a medical case to be treated by professionals. As a result, professional institutions were built and control over disabled people moved into the hands of doctors and the people in charge of these institutions. The end results were the continual alienation of disabled people as human beings.

The development of the civil rights movement in the United States by the middle of the sixties pushed towards a new model on disability. Disabled people are no longer seen as a medical or care related case but a social issue that fits within the human rights framework. The Vietnam War helped in the formation of a strong lobby of disabled people inside the United States and this movement succeeded in liberating disability from institutional control and locating it within the civil rights approach. Disability had become a social concern. By definition disability was no longer the product of a medical case but a social issue related to the degree of social acceptance of disability as a difference. What was needed was not the search for cures to different types of disability that may never succeed, but to alter social attitudes towards disability to accommodate people with disabilities as part of the social fabric of society. This paradigmatic shift started to be promoted worldwide by the middle of the seventies. National and international organizations of people with disability were formed. The most important of these are Disabled Peoples International, the World Union of the Blind and the World Union of the Deaf. Conferences, conventions and seminars started to focus on the issue as such and this process culminated in the adoption of the United Nations World Council of the International Charter on Disability Rights in 1975 and the World Program of Action in 1983. Furthermore, scholars with disabilities were successful in publishing research works and analyses on the subject mainly in the United States and Britain. One can mention in particular the efforts of Mike Oliver of Kent

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University who is the first Professor of Disability Studies in Britain, and Jane Campbell a disability activist.

No doubt women with a disability face the same discrimination syndrome as disabled people in general. However, such women differ in two main areas. First, disabled women – among women in general – are most vulnerable in terms of being the victims of rape and sexual abuse. Related to the above and due to the common social attitude towards women, the second aspect of peculiarity is the fact that women with a disability are the victims of deprivation in rural and conservative societies. Accordingly, they are the most uneducated and unemployed within the disability movement. However, until the nineties the special concerns of women with disabilities were pursued neither by the feminist movement nor the disability movement. The two most important events that pushed the issue were the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 and the Washington Conference on the subject of women with disability in 1997. Some publications began to appear on the subject including Esther Boylan's book: *Women and Disability*, Susan Epstein: *We Can Make It, Stories of Disabled Women in Developing Countries*. And maybe the most important is the book by Danuta M. Krotoski, Margaret A. Nosek, and Margaret A. Turk: *Women with Physical Disability*. These books are a combination of both analytical articles on different aspects of the double discrimination that a woman with disability suffers from or a personal account of the experiences of women with disability in different areas of the world. What is common about the issue of women with disability is that the differentiation between disability and gender did not materialize. Women with disability at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 were lobbying to introduce disability as one of the cases that should be included in the declaration. What was interesting is the lack of concern within the feminist movement to introduce the case of women with disability as an essential

part of the struggle for the equalization of rights at the gender level. Women with disability were not seen as women with double discrimination but as disabled persons. Accordingly, their case fits within the rights of people with disability regardless of the peculiarity of the case of disabled women. One cannot claim today that things have changed drastically in recognizing the case of women with disability as an independent or peculiar case within the disability cause.

As far as the Arab world is concerned, the issue of disability started to witness a major shift at the beginning of the new century. With the exception of Lebanon, where disability started to be seen as a social and human rights issue by the end of the 1980s, most of the Arab world started to adopt the social paradigm by the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before this period, disability was considered as a care case in the Arab world. Most disability related policies at both the governmental and societal levels were directed towards strengthening the power of the institutions at the expense of policies directed towards the inclusion of people with disability in the society. In fact, disabled people were not included in the making of decisions concerning disability policies in their society. Organizations of people with disability were almost non-existent in most Arab countries. The change became evident by the end of the twentieth century. Two reasons may be attributed to such a shift. The first was the increasing pressure from the UN and international agencies and NGOs to push towards the adoption of the rights-based approach to disability. The second was that disabled people succeeded in organizing themselves regionally in the Arab Organization of Disabled People and pushing Arab governments to adopt 2004-2013 as the Arab Decade of Disabled People, which is basically a rights-

based approach document and an integrative plan of action for people with disability. What is interesting about the decade and is not found in other decades documents worldwide is the inclusion of women with disability as one of its 11 axes. Such an inclusion asserts an Arab position of considering the issue of women with disability as an important and peculiar case within the disability cause.

In reviewing the literature on the subject of disability in the Arab world one can clearly witness the poverty of the intellectual production in the field. Most writings tackle specific issues of a medical and general nature and are done by non-disabled people and professionals. However, the international trend coupled with the lobbying efforts of some disabled people's organizations in the region have led to the introduction of the discourse of rights and integration within the social discourse and new literature on disability in the Arab world. The literature on such kinds of activities is mainly found in the publications of the National Association for the Rights of Disabled People in Lebanon (NARD), such as the "Echo of Disabled People" magazine, the booklet on the question of religion and disability, the published details of the Conference on Independent Living held in Beirut in 1995 in addition to the translation of Oxfam's Peter Coleridge's book: *Disability, Liberation and Development*.

The question of women with disability in the Arab world began to be highlighted by the beginning of the nineties. NARD and its magazine were probably the first to give this question some importance. Accounts of personal experiences were published; furthermore, NARD organized a series of working sessions in 1996 and 1997 on the issue. In addition, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held a special seminar on the

subject in Amman, Jordan in 1994. Another similar one dealing with the problems of blind women was organized in the region in 1995 by the World Union of the Blind. By the beginning of the twenty-first century two new books dealing with the issue of women with disability were published. The first one, *Gender and Disability*, edited by Lina Abu-Habib in both Arabic and English and published by Oxfam in the year 2000, tackles the life experiences of a number of women with disability in the Arab world. The second book is written by Jahda Abou Khalil in Arabic and published by NARD in 2002 under the title: *Women who Crossed the Barriers: the Experience of 21 Women with Disability in the Arab World*. These two books were the first two documents to deal directly with the issue of women with disability in the Arab world. However, the issue is still in its infancy and has not yet formed its peculiarity within the disability movement as a case and discourse.

It is the objective of this issue of *Al-Raida* to highlight the case of women with disability in the Arab world. The issue covers many aspects of the subject. It includes the testimonies of a number of women with disability representing the different categories of disability and from different Arab countries. It also tackles some specific subjects such as employment and women with disability and disability situations in some of the Arab countries. The most important thing is that this issue is the first to deal with the subject as a case on its own.

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#### END NOTES

See Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage Books, 1961.