

# The Disabled Woman in Syria

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The problem of those with special needs is not a matter of pity and charity, but a matter of rights stipulated by the monotheistic religions, ratified by international organizations and included in national constitutions. The problem is now raised in order to insist on the disabled people's rights to lead a normal life just like any person whose life cannot be complete unless he/she enjoys those rights, such as security, equality, work and equal chances, so that every individual will be able to have his/her place and enjoy a secure and settled life.

The United Nations estimates the number of disabled people to be 10% of the population; i.e. that the number of disabled people in the world is now 600 million, although this percentage varies greatly from one country to another. Probably the most important reasons for this difference are wars and the degree of backwardness. Poor countries and those that suffer from recurring wars have a greater percentage of disability. Thus 492 million disabled people are in the developing countries; yet we also find a high percentage of disabled people in some of the developed countries. This is not due to a high number of disabled persons, but due to the fact that their definition of disability includes other groups, such as those with faulty kidneys and diabetes. Although all religions

have stipulated that the care of the disabled and the weak, to protect and help them, and consider helping and supporting them is a form of prayer, we find that marginalizing and neglecting them is the rule, and caring for them does not go beyond giving them alms and gifts in the event of a feast or a religious occasion. If this is the case with disabled persons in general, we find that women are even more affected.

Women in general, and disabled women in particular, suffered – and until recently – continued to suffer from a double disability due to ignorance, backwardness and the primitiveness of the infrastructure. Up to the Second World War very rarely was a man seen pushing a disabled woman in a wheelchair in public places. Families did not even admit they had a disabled woman in their midst for fear of this being a possible barrier to the marriage of her sisters and brothers. And lucky were those who were taken to a doctor. The number of disabled women who traveled to Europe or even to Istanbul for medical treatment is very small.

This all means not going to school and, as a result, illiteracy, unemployment, backwardness, introversion, staying in one room with only the family, and especially the

mother, doing their duty towards the disabled person, this duty being restricted to supplying food and clothing. Thus all social activities are non-existent. The woman who could impose herself was the one who had been able to learn knitting; reading and writing she would learn from her brothers who used to read and write in her presence. Exceptional cases such as a disabled woman entering university were thanks to her family who loved education and knowledge and insisted on her learning and spent dearly to ensure this.

This was the case until the middle of the last century, i.e. after the Second World War, when official and family attitudes toward the disabled persons changed radically. Large numbers of young men in the countries that had participated in the war had been obliged to quit the factories in which they had been working in order to join the war, and there was a dire need for workers. The solution was found by employing the women and the disabled. Thus those workers imposed themselves and people acknowledged their merit, and regarded the soldiers who had been wounded in the war as national heroes. Therefore many unions, societies and associations caring for the disabled persons were created, calling for treating them as equals to the rest of the citizens, helping them and facilitating their lives. The governments also issued many laws protecting the disabled persons and encouraging their integration into society.

Such ideas about integration started to reach the Arab countries from various sources. The media, disabled persons, their families and many responsible people started calling for equal rights for the disabled persons and for guaranteeing them a respectable life. As a result the state established specialized schools for the disabled persons, model institutions to teach the blind, and rehabilitation centers. The societies and institutions followed suit, thus many opportunities became available to all the disabled persons to learn and receive professional training.

The last three decades have witnessed great changes in the way people understand disability, and numerous conferences, symposiums and workshops were organized to clarify the term *disability*, to encourage the governments and the people to help the disabled persons, explain their potential, and propel the governments to issue laws that facilitate their integration into society.

This is what prompted us to show the present situation of disabled women in Syria:

According to July 2004 statistics the Syrian population is 17,793,000, of whom 51.09% are male, which indicates that the number of women in Syria is 8,702,557. If we

take into consideration the United Nations' estimate the number of disabled women in Syria would be 870,255.

### The Law

Although Syrian law states that all citizens are equal, and does not differentiate between normal and disabled citizens, president Bashar Al-Assad issued Law Number 34 on 18th July 2004 pertaining to disabled persons, and containing the special definitions of the disability, the parties concerned, the services offered them in health, education, higher learning, sports, rehabilitation, work, appropriate environment, media, awareness, exemptions and services. This law respects the disabled persons in Syria and its implementation will enable the disabled persons to overcome many of the obstacles they face in the different realms of life.

### Education

Education in Syria is obligatory and free until the end of the elementary level (the third preparatory class). In spite of this many disabled girls never go to school.

The percentage of the illiterate among those over ten is 15%, which means that the number of disabled girls who have not been to school is more than 130,538, and it is estimated that the number of illiterate disabled females surpasses this number by far, since many of them had been unable to go to school because of their poverty, or their inability to reach a school due to their disability or the distance to the school, or the absence of architectural facilities. Table 1 below shows the number of students in the Amal School for the Physically Disabled, according to the school registers.

**Table 1: Number of students in the Amal School for the Physically Disabled, according to the school registers**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1989-1990	153	59	212
1990-1991	144	54	198
1991-1992	144	60	204
1992-1993	151	81	232
1993-1994	216	130	346
1994-1995	145	88	233
1995-1996	144	73	217
1996-1997	161	88	249
1997-1998	175	81	256
1998-1999	86	54	140
1999-2000	92	46	138
2000-2001	101	49	150
2001-2002	82	41	123
2002-2003	82	41	123
2003-2004	83	50	133

**Table 2: The number of students in the Amal School for the Deaf and Dumb between 1993-2004, according to the school register**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1993-1994	241	151	392
1994-1995	237	166	403
1995-1996	248	158	248
1996-1997	260	188	448
1997-1998	231	171	402
1998-1999	234	190	424
1999-2000	224	190	414
2000-2001	269	223	492
2001-2002	283	259	542
2002-2003	266	250	516
2003-2004	203	203	?

It is clear from Tables 1 and 2 that girls with a hearing disability who had attended the school were more numerous than those with physical disability. This shows it is easier for them to get there. Although the figures do not show an increase in numbers this does not mean that their numbers decreased, for the state opened other schools in other provinces. In 2002 the Ministry of Education also started an ambitious program aiming at teaching disabled pupils in regular schools and launched this experiment in a number of schools in Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo. The experiment is expected to spread out in order to include the biggest possible number of disabled students.

Families today are insisting on teaching their daughters for practical reasons. Parents have started realizing the importance of education since an educated girl has a much better chance of finding work than an uneducated one. Besides, some social reasons have arisen that have encouraged sending the girls to school. The family is no longer well-knit, and the father no longer sure that his daughter will be well looked after, for his family might disperse and his disabled daughter's future be unknown, therefore, it is mandatory to have her educated. This is why the parents insist on teaching their disabled daughter before the others, and are adamant about ensuring her life, existence and stability.

### Sports and Entertainment

The Union of Sports for the Disabled began its activities in the mid-1980s. From the start women took part in the sports and won several championships in a variety of games, but their best achievement was in table tennis and weight lifting in which some of the players won the Arab and West Asian championships, and the Special Olympic players won several medals in regional and world championships.

The disabled woman tries to have several hobbies and to participate in social activities, but the financial factor is the main problem. Had she had a constant and fixed income she would have been able to participate in most of the activities, but in its absence she can only take part in what is important.

### Habilitation and Work

For a disabled woman to work she must have either a scientific or a technical diploma. Therefore she is directed towards a school, as we have seen, or towards vocational training; that is, either towards centers for special training or towards the Center for the Vocational Habilitation of the Disabled. An increasing number of disabled girls have graduated from this Center due to the great demand for it.

**Table 3: The number of students in the Center for the Vocational Habilitation of the Disabled and the number of trained girls:**

Year	Males	Females	Total
1990-1991	49	23	72
1991-1992	51	25	76
1992-1993	45	20	65
1993-1994	57	25	82
1994-1995	41	23	64
1995-1996	42	15	57
1996-1997	53	19	72
1997-1998	51	22	73
1998-1999	50	20	70
1999-2000	70	34	114
2000-2001	102	52	154

Source: Yehia Afnikhar, *Vocational Rehabilitation for those with Special Needs*, p.113.

Table 3 shows that the number of those attending the Center is increasing steadily, especially the number of girls.

Regarding work, the old law permitted the ministries, institutions and companies to have 4% of their workforce disabled people, and a great number of disabled women benefited from this law. They worked in ministries and companies and especially in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor which attracted a large number of disabled females. The basic law which was issued towards the end of 2004 concerning those employed by the government stipulated that disabled employees should not be less than 4% and asked the ministries, institutions and companies to abide by this law. This meant reopening the door to more disabled people to work in the government. Then, too, the law mentioned above concerning caring for and habilitating the disabled persons offered the private sector many incentives to

encourage them to employ disabled people, such as exempting them from part of their taxes. This meant that the private sector would open its doors to the disabled persons.

Among disabled women today we find university professors, doctors, writers, lawyers, teachers, poets, novelists, employees in both the public and private sectors, as well as gifted artists and artisans who have produced many beautiful artistic objects. Disabled women will soon be occupying new posts.

In conclusion, the disabled woman in Syria has come a long way, and has passed through several important stages, some of them thanks to her will power, and others thanks to the help of her family and non-governmental organizations. But the longest way was and will be thanks to the decrees that were and still will be issued by the specialists in power. We will find the disabled woman enjoying a normal life, going to school with other disabled and non-disabled children, working in institutions with other disabled and non-disabled people, and thus participating with the other citizens in the social, economic and scientific development of this country.

## “Veil(s)”



The Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW), Lebanese American University (LAU) recently published a catalogue entitled “Veil(s).” The catalogue serves as a photographic overview of veiled women and includes sixty-nine photos depicting various modes of veiling among Christian, Druze, Jewish, and Muslim women. It also includes a series of quotations from a wide array of persons belonging to different religious, social, political, educational, and cultural backgrounds, as well as personal testimonies.

For those interested in ordering the catalogue kindly contact IWSAW by fax: 009611791645 or by email: [iwsaw@lau.edu.lb](mailto:iwsaw@lau.edu.lb).

The catalogue costs \$10 excluding postage charges.