

The Hidden Stars of Palestine: How Disabled Women are Obscured from Middle Eastern Culture

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Background

The disparity between disabled men and women in the Middle East has become increasingly prevalent. The religious and cultural practices of this region influence the classification of disability and societal outlooks on it. While Palestinian law forbids discrimination based on disability, it is unclear how much this pertains to women and their role in society. International law aims to protect the rights of the disabled and of women; however, with nations in political turmoil, as is the case in Palestine, rights are often overlooked, and policies can fall short with implementation.³ The prevalence of disability can be attributed to the political climate of the region.⁶ War-attributed injuries, particularly in the region of the Gaza strip, contribute to physical, hearing, and vision impairments.⁶ Strain on healthcare establishments furthers both the development and effects of disability on the population, producing a social environment which perpetuates impairment of affected individuals.¹¹

Methods and Materials

A literature review was completed. Sources include current studies, surveys, texts, and governmental policies that pertain to disability in Palestine. Most data is qualitative, due to lack of recent quantitative data on the topic. For the purpose of this review, disability will be examined through the lens of gender and culture.

Research Questions

1. How are disabled women viewed and treated differently than disabled men in Palestine?
2. How does the Stars of Palestine organization assist women with disabilities?

Disability Theory

A common approach to viewing and analyzing disability is the social model of disability. This model essentially states that a person's disability is defined by their environment and those around them.⁹ A person's impairment becomes disabling by barriers put in place by outside factors, and the disability can be alleviated by eliminating these barriers.⁹ Unfortunately, this model often does not account for cultural effects on disability and how it is viewed.⁹ This is an especially significant issue in the context of the research we have conducted.

Another approach is the medical model, in which disability is viewed as an ailment which requires treatment, alteration, or adjustment of the person with said disability.⁴ The focus of the medical model is on adapting a person with a disability to the norms of a non-disabled individual.⁴

A third perspective is the charity model. Religious organizations are thought to have been among the first to approach and deal with disability.² From this approach, disability is often seen as shameful, relating the condition to sin or a test from God.² In societies where this is the predominant mindset, disabled individuals, and their families, may aim to hide their disability and are often denied proper care and opportunities as a result.

Defining Disability in Palestine

Disabling factors in Palestine are noticeably different from what is considered disabling in the western world. Polio has proven to be a major source of disability in these regions, despite it being eradicated in most other places; one disability study notes that around ¼ of its participants become disabled from the disease.³ As a result of high rates of displaced people and geographic proximity to regions of Polio outbreaks, there is humanitarian action towards reducing low vaccination rates and implementing outbreak response plans.⁵ Additionally, other illnesses that would otherwise be treatable can be disabling in these regions, such as scoliosis.³

Outlooks on disability similarly differ, with the charity model being the predominant mindset for individuals living in this region. Disability is closely tied with Islamic law, especially in a region like Palestine, leading to this being the principal view.

Findings

Views on disability are noticeably different between disabled Palestinian men and women. Disabled men are often viewed as “war heroes”, even if their disability is not a result of war, while female disability is seen as shameful and greatly limits one's quality of life.³ Disabled women are often left with their family and prohibited from marriage, as it is seen as dishonorable if their family does not provide continuous care for them.³ Palestinian women with disabilities are often left unable to work due to these cultural constraints, and are thus met with another barrier to independence. One survey found that only 4% of the disabled female Palestinian population worked, while 24% of the disabled men held a job.⁷ While both statistics are less than optimal, the disparity between disabled men and women remains clear.

Marriage and reproductive rights are a large part of womanhood under Islamic law.⁸ The prevention of fulfilling this role tied both to cultural and religious identity reduces the quality of life for disabled women and harms self-image.⁸ Sexual relations outside of marriage are strictly prohibited and sometimes even punishable by death.³ This means that disabled women who are not permitted to be married are completely robbed of any form of sexuality. Additionally, motherhood is often viewed as a woman's sole purpose in life; taking away the ability of a woman to marry due to her disability also takes away her ability to become a mother.³ This could be detrimental to her most basic identity as a woman.

Founded in 2006, Stars of Hope is working to combat these issues, while maintaining respect for Palestinian culture, through educating others about the inequality disabled women face.¹⁰ Their efforts are targeted towards spreading awareness and implementing policies that protect women with disabilities.¹⁰ Using social media and other technology, this organization connects and provides support for disabled women.¹⁰ They use their platform to find and provide jobs for these women, promoting self-sufficiency and a means of independence.¹⁰ Stars of Hope has made real change by visiting rehabilitation centers and connecting disabled women with internships in real civil and governmental positions.¹⁰



Taken from an album titled “Fun Day” on the Stars of Hope website, disabled women and girls have painted their hopes for the future.¹⁰

Conclusion and Next Steps

Due to Palestine being subjected to prolonged conflicts, the preservation of international human rights is consistently overlooked. This is also not aided by the cultural standards women are held to. In the bulk of culture in Palestine, womanhood is seen as achieved through perfect physical wholeness. This ideology impacts these women more than their actual disability. Societal norms control disabled women's lives in deciding choices, such as them being unfit for motherhood.³

In conducting our research, it became increasingly obvious how little the topic of disabled women in the Middle East has been represented. Where it was previously discussed intimately in the 90s following a large social movement in Palestine for female autonomy, discussion of female rights, especially when it comes to disability, is currently limited.¹ Regarding further action, steps must be taken in order to ensure equity and representation for the disabled women of these regions. Additional resources and research is critical.

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