

Disabled Palestinians in Israel: Between Discrimination and Social Exclusion

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The Arab community in Israel uses a range of terms to define a complex and diverse group whose members share a common denominator: "disability." The terms used include "handicapped", "disabled people", "people with special needs", "people with unique needs and challenges," and "people with capabilities and various impairments". These terms are intended to enhance communication and understanding of the issue of disability. In practice, however, they reflect the extent of the confusion that surrounds the issue and the degree of exclusion in which the disabled population lives.

Each of the terms listed above entails a system of values and ideologies that project and reinforce a certain attitude, view and social position. The pendulum swings from the view of the disabled as unfortunates who need pity and charity, to the view of the disabled as a population with multiple capabilities that is entitled to full participation and integration in all social systems, from employment to entertainment and leisure. The term "handicapped," which is currently used in the Israeli National Insurance Institute Law, is outdated and perceived as a patronizing term that attributes dependence and debility to this group.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was adopted on 13 December 2006 and signed by Israel on 30 March 2007 but is not yet ratified, adopts the term "persons with disabilities" to describe people with physical, sensory, mental and/or emotional disabilities. This terminology is favored by Western countries and in Israeli law today. However, it will surely soon also be replaced by a term that expresses greater equality, fairness and justice.

Approximately 1.5 million people with moderate to severe disabilities live in Israel today. The percentage of disabled people within the Palestinian Arab community in Israel is twice as high as in the Jewish community: 17.2% of adult Palestinian Arab citizens suffer from severe disability, compared to 8.7% of adult Jewish citizens (Ben Moshe, Ruffman and Haber, 2009).

The total number of adult Arabs in Israel with moderate or severe disabilities is 170,000. They represent 26% of all disabled people in the Arab population, a far higher percentage than the corresponding population among Jewish disabled people, at 17% (Naon, 2009).

The educational level of the Arab disabled population is also much lower than that of the Jewish disabled population: 19% of Arab disabled persons did not complete elementary school, compared to just 5% of Jewish disabled persons in Israel. Furthermore, only 21% of disabled Arabs are employed in the labor market, compared to 49% among disabled Jews (Naon, 2009).

Political and Society Reality

Disabled Palestinian Arabs in Israel suffer from compound discrimination. They are discriminated against on the basis that they are people with disabilities, and also on the basis of their affiliation to a national minority that is discriminated against and excluded by the

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authorities and by the dominant majority. Examples of this double discrimination exist in all fields of life. The quality of services provided by the state to disabled Arabs is poor, and in some cases the services are not available at all (Sandler-Loeff and Shahak, 2006). For example:

- Official documents are seldom translated into Arabic including application forms required to arrange essential services for people with mental disabilities. A high percentage of Palestinian Arabs suffer from such disabilities and require these services.
- Many services are not available to Arab disabled people in their areas of residence. Thus, they must travel long distances to receive these services or they must forego them. (Sandler-Loeff and Shahak, 2006).
- Although Israeli law mandates that public places should be accessible to disabled persons, very few public buildings in Arab towns and villages are so available. In some Arab localities even the branch offices of the National Insurance Institute, which is supposed to provide services to people with disabilities, are not accessible to the disabled.
- Many of the diagnostic committees within the National Insurance Institute have no Arabic speaking members. This fact makes communication between the examiner and examinee difficult, and can result in inaccurate diagnoses that do not reflect the true situation of the disabled person.
- The disparity between the level of medical services provided to the Palestinian Arab citizens and those provided to Jewish citizens in Israel stands to increase the risk that people suffering from chronic medical problems will go on to develop severe disabilities. This disparity partly explains the relatively high percentage of people with severe physical disabilities within the Palestinian Arab community in Israel (Ben Moshe, Ruffman and Haber, 2009; Naon, 2009).
- As stated above, Palestinian Arabs with disabilities face discrimination in the labor market and the percentage of employed persons in this population is particularly low (Naon, 2009). In addition, most of those who are employed work in subsidized or special work placements, a situation that limits the realization of their potential human capital.
- The situation faced by Arab women with disabilities is worse still since these women also face gender-based discrimination. The multiple forms of discrimination against them make it difficult for them to integrate into the labor market and the social life of their communities (Naon, 2009; Sandler-Loeff and Shahak, 2006).
- Also as noted previously, Palestinian Arab disabled people in Israel have a lower average education level not only relative to the average Palestinian Arab citizen of Israel, but also relative to Jewish people with disabilities in Israel (Ben Moshe, Ruffman, and Haber, 2009). The inferior level of education among disabled Palestinians leads to their further exclusion from the labor market and, inevitably, to poverty, isolation, dependency and low self-esteem.

These examples clearly indicate that the state has yet to take full responsibility for creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities among the Palestinian Arab minority in Israel. This responsibility includes making services accessible and adapting them to the disabled population that uses them, and fostering their ability to take full advantage of existing services. In addition,

it is the state's responsibility to enable each individual to make the best use of his/her abilities and personal, intellectual and emotional potential. This approach is based on the right of each person to be an equal and valued citizen, even if he or she is living with a disability.

In addition to discrimination that stems from their national belonging, Palestinian Arab people with disabilities in Israel also experience internal social exclusion (Sandler-Loeff and Shahak, 2006) as they are often perceived as unfortunate people with inferior abilities. At best, the prevailing attitudes toward them are pity and a desire to act kindly toward them. In less benign cases, they encounter neglect, exploitation by their families and oppression. Society perceives successful people who have disabilities as superhuman figures and rare, exceptional cases. Discrimination on the basis of national belonging and exclusion by their own group combine to create a reality in which most disabled Palestinian Arabs are relegated to the social margins. This "double exclusion" entails a great loss as a significant part of the disabled population is unable to utilize its abilities or to realize its human capital potential within their own society.

The Palestinian Arab community in Israel must reassess its attitudes toward disabled persons. Civil society organizations operating in this community have yet to identify the issues of the disabled population as a significant part of their discourse and daily activities. The efforts invested in such issues to date have been insufficient.

Although the state is responsible for guaranteeing equality, the exercise of rights and the accessibility of services, such goals also fall within the duties of representatives of Palestinian civil society. Changing the ways in which people with disabilities are viewed and shifting the discussion about them from the margins to the center of the social and political discourse are essential first steps. Given the urgent need for such steps, these organizations must start to regard this population as a significant part of the public agenda and begin to discuss issues pertaining to disabled people as part of the regular daily discourse, not only the discourse of International Human Rights Day.

Of course, the needed change is not restricted to the declaratory level. The relevant government ministries must take intensive, consistent action to engender change in the state's attitude toward disabled Palestinian Arabs in Israel, to promote their interests, and improve their situation. In addition, a conceptual, social and moral change is needed to create an equal, just, enabling, open and tolerant society.

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