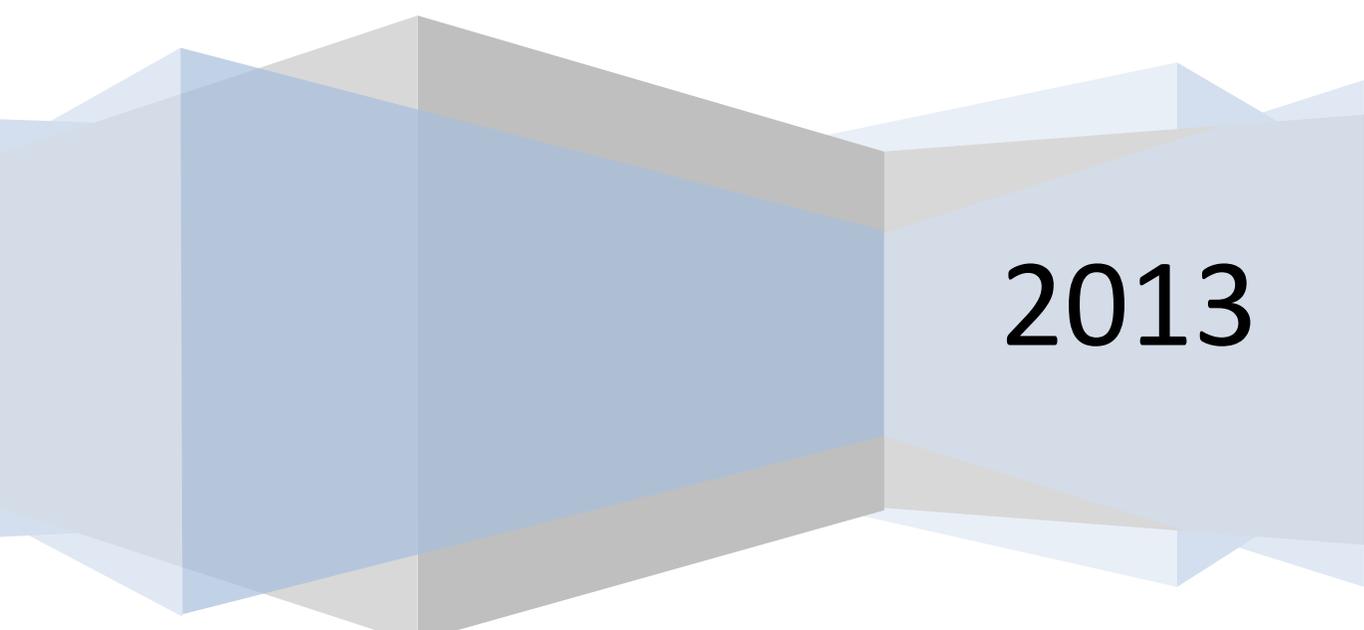


**Invisible People: Women and Girls with  
Disabilities and access to Rights Organizations  
to in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Palestinian  
Refugee Camps in Lebanon.**

**Imad Sayrafi**



**2013**

# 1. Introduction

In line with advocacy towards a rights-based approach to disability in Palestinian society, this study explores the reality of females with disability (FWD) in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. It focuses on the reality of FWD and their interaction with civil society organizations including those related to disability, women, and human rights. It bases itself upon an implicit understanding that these organizations play an important role in achieving positive change and equality for this constituency.

This study will attempt to explore the extent to which rights organizations recognize FWDs, how FWDs are approached in their work, how FWD assess this approach, and recommendations aiming to improve this relationship in ways beneficial to society overall.

The issue of disability is a cross-sectoral issue whose responsibility falls upon all. Society is called upon to recognize discrimination, inequality, and work towards positive change.

Such a study is important as it puts to test professed attitudes toward disability and views them in practice and reality.

This study will analyze relevant literature by reviewing various concepts of disability in general, and the main concepts related to women and disability in particular, identifying general issues and concerns in this field of disability, and those specific to FWDs.

Furthermore fieldwork was carried out to form a deeper understanding of stakeholder opinions and approaches. This included interviews with organizations working on human rights, women rights, and disability, in addition to focus groups with FWD, and a survey targeting FWD.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1.1 The concept of “Disability”**

The social construction of a marginalized group influences the way individuals are treated in society. People with disability (PWD) generally can be said to suffer from discriminatory attitudes towards them. Theoretical approaches to understand disability range from viewing it as a medical, social, economic, and a postmodern issue (Jaeger, 2008).

When defining disability and disability models, views tend to vacillate from those which focus on impairment, to those which embrace more social understanding. The social model of disability finds disability to be a social construct viewing impairment as an individual issue. This contrasts with the medical model of disability which finds impairment and disability to be interchangeable, and disability being a biological function. (Mitra, 2006). The importance of the social model is its shift from viewing disability as an individual issue towards seeing it as an issue pertinent to society, and thus to be addressed by society rather than the individual. The social perspective also focuses on ways in which social organizations oppress people with disabilities,

It is important to note that many models have also emerged within the social and medical models as well. Thus it should be recognized that there are many models and understandings of disability and that no single model can completely explain disability. The prevalence of different models can create important strategies for advocacy and enrich understanding of the subject through different perspectives.

The social model, and related definitions present an important part of a rights-based approach, as adopted by the UN Convention for the Rights of People with Disability (CRPD), and which forms the basis of the human rights approach to disability rights. This view sees disability as the result of interaction with society, and thus the barriers present in society are argued to be disabling, rather than the individual's impairment. This provides an important standpoint from which the rights of PWD to live in barrier-free environments should be recognized. This model rejects the view that

disability is a problem of an individual, and thus recognizes that the rights of the disabled are human rights, thus forming the basis of advocacy work. (UN, 2006) The CRPD also views the role of governmental, civil society, and disability organizations to be integral in achieving equality for PWD.

The human rights-based approach to development in general, emerges from a number of core values, which, when applied to disability rights, assumes the view that PWDs are not objects of charity but rights holders. This approach is based upon an outlook that sees the need to empower and engage PWDs, enforcing their rights as an indivisible part of other rights. Furthermore, it attempts to identify the rights of people and the duties of state actors, rights organizations, and the community as a whole.

### **2.1.2 Women with Disabilities and Exclusion**

People with disabilities comprise one of the world's largest minority groups. According to the World Bank, they PWD are more likely to be marginalized in their communities than other groups, demonstrate higher levels of poverty, and lack education and unemployment (World Bank, 2005).

Differences of race, gender, and social class are also often ignored in regards to disability. This blindness was also present in other social movements, with women with disabilities often excluded from both disability and women movements in general. The double disadvantage of being a woman with disability creates impediments to having a role in society. Furthermore, women with disability face difficult economic, social, and psychological situations that are unique to them as women with disability. Women with disability are also viewed within society more negatively than men with disability. (Asch & Fine, 1988)

Moreover, men and women experience disability differently, with little differentiation usually made between these experiences (Habib, 1998). While their male counterparts are more likely to marry and take part in family life, most societies generally eschew women with disabilities marrying or having children (Boylan, 1991)

### **2.1.3 Interaction with the Public**

Many women with disabilities express forms of discrimination and humiliation in their interactions with the public (Lonsdale, 1990).

Many crimes committed against FWD are accepted by societies. There is also a lack of support systems and accessibility measures for FWDs that would allow women to escape violent situations.

When women with disabilities do seek help from organizations, they usually find the inclusion of women with disabilities in programs to be marginal, and many times nonexistent. Furthermore women with disability are often not believed or taken seriously when trying to get help through judicial systems.

Women with disability are also often invisible in women's organizations, particularly when it comes to leadership. A more general sensitivity to disability in organizational policies is also lacking. This effectively enforces the exclusion of FWDs from participating in these organizations (Fiduccia and Wolf, 1999: 26).

### **2.2.1 Disability in the Palestinian Context**

The Occupied Palestinian Territory is under Israeli military occupation, and the Palestinian Authority is largely dependent on foreign aid. These two reasons are often cited as the reason for the lack of implementation of the Palestinian Disability Law. Many of the services provided that target PWD are within the scope of work of NGOs, international organizations, and civil society organizations.

The Israeli occupation is restrictive economically and socially, and creates more barriers for access for PWD (Khan 2004), in addition to movement restrictions between towns, villages, and borders. It is important to note that 5% of PWD aged 18 and older attribute the cause of their disability to Israeli measures (PCBS, 2011).

Medical and charity approaches tend to be most prevalent in Palestinian society making the transition to a rights-based approach slow and requiring the raising of awareness of society at large.

A major achievement of the Palestinian disability movement was passage of the 1999 Disability Law, though its lack of implementation remains a main problem. The rights of PWDs, like many Palestinian rights, falls beneath the scope of activity of the Ministry of Social Affairs, together with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in refugee camps. This demonstrates how disability is yet to be seen as a cross-sector issue, and instead is largely perceived from a perspective of charity. (Norad, 2012)

In 2011, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics carried out a National Disability Survey, representing an important step in PWD rights recognition. National statistics and surveys are seen as an important part of the rights-based approach as outlined by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) (UN, 2006: Article 31). Rights-based approaches also depend on cooperation between the government, civil society organizations, grassroots organizations, and Disabled People's Organizations (DPO's) in raising awareness around disability rights and ensuring the mainstreaming and inclusion of PWDs in policies and programs.

The survey shed light on the reality of PWDs and the degree of their marginalization. It found that more than one third of PWDs have never been to school, around 87% do not work, and one third were never married. Around 22% of PWD drop out of school due to environmental barriers. Furthermore, there is considerable difficulty in physically moving within the community due to matters of inaccessibility, in addition to environmental barriers, inaccessible infrastructure, difficulty in performing daily activities, and negative attitudes in the society. Females with disability in general, face additional difficulty when compared to their male counterparts in moving within public spaces. (PCBS, 2011)

Thus, many PWD face discrimination and are excluded from society, due to the many different barriers that prevent access. It is also important to note, that people with

certain kinds of impairments face additional discrimination and exclusion, including from PWD themselves.

### **2.2.2 Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon**

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon do not enjoy civil or social rights from the Lebanese government, putting them at a disadvantage to the society at large. They are not allowed to work in more than twenty specified professions, and are not officially citizens of any country. Refugee females with disability, thus, deal with major disadvantages related to gender, disability, and their refugee status. They depend on receiving services from the UNRWA and civil society organizations. Furthermore, they are ineligible to benefit from the disability law in Lebanon, which addresses issues of Lebanese PWD. The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) periodic review for the year 2010, which is produced by the civil society coalition in Lebanon, finds that Palestinian refugees with disability face discrimination and exclusion, and live in dire conditions. They face problems ranging from lack of inclusive education, to disqualification from health services, access denial to employment, inability to build houses (due to refugee status), among other forms of exclusion and discrimination.

### **2.3 Women with Disabilities in the Middle East and Palestine**

Lina Abu Habib's book *Gender and Disability: Women Experiences in the Middle East* (1997), includes a number of articles outlining the perspectives of women with disabilities in the region. The disability movement is also discussed and criticized regarding its approach to gender dimensions. Furthermore, there is no real evidence that women with disability have benefited from the women movement particularly since official statistics and research usually ignore social differences between women.

Historically, and in Palestine, disability was seen as a source of shame in the family, and PWD were largely invisible. Male PWD were still somewhat advantaged in comparison to women however, maintaining economic significance in their families.

Females with disability in contrast are often seen as a burden on resources with no hope for marriage. Furthermore, it is not unusual for a FWD to be hidden, having interaction only with immediate family.

There is currently some improvement in the situation of FWD and their participation in civil society, however, the rights of Palestinian women as a whole remain unresolved. (Habib, 1997).

This paper studies FWD interaction with civil society organizations, mainly women and human rights organizations. It is part of a project that aims to address FWD access to justice and related services in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon (hereafter referred to as “FWD in Lebanon”). The focus on civil society organizations stems from a rights-based approach and the inseparable role of civil society organizations, and society as a whole, in advocating for and implementing accessible and positive equitable standards. Moreover, it is important to assess the policies, programs, and efforts of civil society organizations to ensure inclusion of FWD in their work. The study thus attempts to shed light on the realities of FWD, and to determine whether human rights, women, and disability organizations take adequate measures to ensure their full and equal representation in programs.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Palestinian human rights organizations base their visions on international human rights standards and local legislation. Many women’s organizations in Palestine equally adopt a human rights approach to women’s rights, stressing the importance of ensuring women’s participation in development processes.

Thus, in assessing the interaction between FWD and human rights and women organizations within the framework of a rights-based approach towards disability, it is important to study the reality of the situation at hand. It should be noted that the creation of the CRPD involved a lot of participation from civil society, which played an essential role in implementing and monitoring, both legally, and as a matter of good practice.

Human rights are not solely the responsibility of the state and state actors. Civil society organizations, such as women's rights, disability, and human rights organizations, play an essential role in promoting, assisting in implementation, and monitoring human rights, playing formal and informal roles in these processes.

Article 3 of the CRPD, stresses the role of civil society, particularly, representative organizations of people with disability, in monitoring the implementation of CRPD, and coordinating with government focal points.

Article 33.2 of the CRPD, deals with the role of human rights organizations in monitoring and protecting the rights of PWD, seen as an important independent mechanism in monitoring and implementing the treaty. (Lord, 2007)

This study aims to assess the nature of the relationship between women with disability and rights organizations, and to see the extent to which Fiduccia and Wolfe's finding of non-inclusion in development and service provision applies to Palestine (Fiduccia and Wolfe, 1999). It furthermore seeks to provide recommendations for the improvement of this relationship.

One mainstreaming model developed by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO, 2006), aims to include PWD in development organizations through a number of primary factors.

These include:

- 1) Organizational commitment to mainstreaming, translated into policy via inclusive policies ;
- 2) Sensitization of individuals and staff;
- 3) Ensuring workplace policies and practices are accessible;
- 4) Ensuring programs the organization provides are inclusive;
- 5) Ensuring organizational barriers are removed at the wider policy level;
- 6) Meaningful involvement of PWD, with a specific gender dimension

## **4. Methodology:**

The methodology in this study involved a number of phases:

**A social consultation stage**, where interviews were held with FWD, human rights organizations, women organizations, and disability related organizations in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The aim of this stage was to shed light on the perspectives of civil society, FWD, and their attitudes and understandings of the rights of FWD, and access to civil society.

Interviews held with civil society organizations included:

**Gaza Strip:**

National Society for Rehabilitation, General Palestinian Union for PWD, Center for Women Affairs, Al Dameer Human Rights Organization, Creative Women's Society, Center for Research and Legal Counseling for Women, Al Meezan Human Rights Center, Falasteen al Mustaqbal (cerebral palsy), Ramallah Center for Human Rights,

**West Bank :**

General Palestinian Union for PWD, Stars of Hope , Al Haq (Human Rights), Independent Commission for Human Rights, Shams (Human Rights), Working Women Society, Women Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, Women Affairs Technical Committee.

**Palestinian Refugee Camps in Lebanon:** Popular Committee (Burj al Barajneh Camp), Society for Community Rehabilitation, Karam Society for PWD, Youth for Development, Development without Borders, Musawa (Nabeel Badran Center for PWD),.

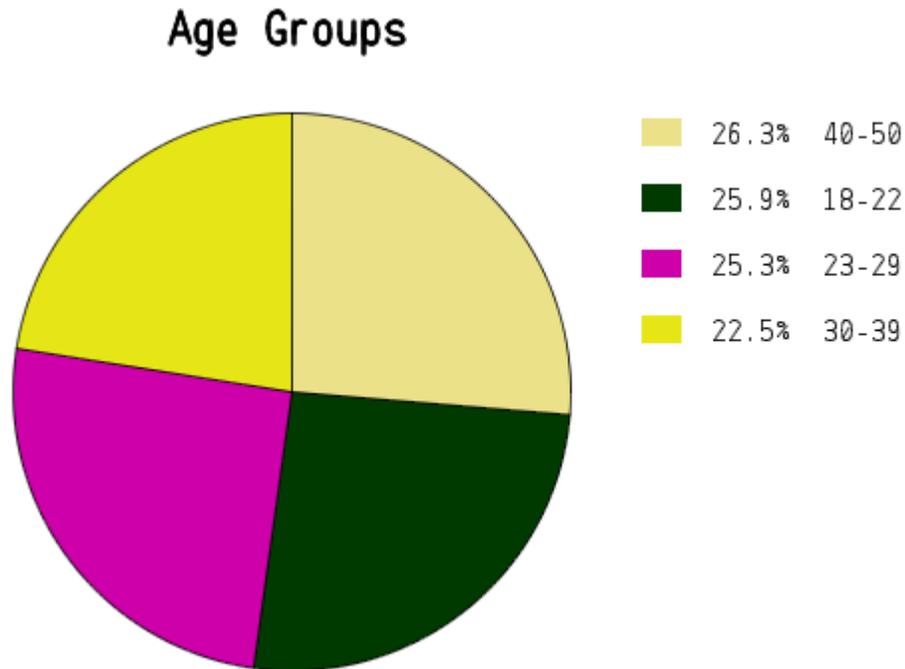
**Focus groups:** 9 focus groups were held with FWD from different areas in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

**Survey:** A survey was conducted where a total of 502 questionnaires with FWD were completed: 201 in the WB, 150 in the GS, and 151 in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Sampling was done using a number of methods; snowball sampling , and with help from key informants, and community based organizations.

Background information related to the sample is as follows:

**Age Groups:**

**The following chart represents the age groups of the survey respondents:**



**Education**

- 33% of respondents are illiterate
- 38% of respondents have less than a secondary school education.
- 13% have completed secondary school.
- 65% of respondents are refugees.

**Types of Disabilities**

- 13.1% of respondents have visual disabilities.
- 11.6% of respondents have a hearing disability.
- 35.9% of respondents have mobility disabilities/physical.
- 17.3% of respondents have intellectual disabilities.
- 2.4% of respondents have speech related disabilities.
- 19.7% of respondents have complex disabilities (more than one disability).

### **Family Income**

- 45% of the respondents describe their family as having limited income.

**Result Analysis Focus Groups:** 12 focus groups were held with FWD in the target areas where the results of the survey were presented and analyzed with participants.

## **5. Analysis of Findings**

### **5.1 FWD perceptions of their reality**

As in the literature, FWD were more likely to be discriminated against and viewed negatively by society affecting how FWD perceive their reality and interact with society in general. FWD expressed concerns related to discrimination and isolation in a variety of ways and on many levels. Starting on the family level, FWD expressed having worse treatment than other siblings, and feel more likely to be deprived from education in the family. Preference was seen as given to siblings without disability, and overall there was a perceived general negative view towards them getting an education in society. In addition FWD face difficulties related to going to public places, using transportation, in addition to a lack of accessibility and suitable infrastructure in their communities. They are also excluded from social life, and feel they are more likely to be abused.

Furthermore, FWD feel they are more likely to be denied many basic rights such as employment, marriage, health care, and inheritance. These perceptions, in addition to the reality of FWD, play a part in their relationships with rights organizations, and society as a whole.

The reality and needs of FWD was most clearly disclosed in the different focus groups who repeatedly expressed they feel excluded from all aspects of life. One of the most mentioned aspects related to the life of FWD was the societal attitudes they face, such as pity, mockery, and social exclusion. Most FWD who are able to change this reality and

become more active in society express that it is a constant struggle, dependent on personal perceptions that are able to overcome familial and societal barriers. This illustrates that disability in society is seen as an individual rather than societal issue, and is thus in line with a medical perspective of disability. Furthermore, FWD expressed that they face different societal barriers according to their environment in addition to those they feel are compounded because they are women.

FWD also repeatedly expressed societal views on marriage, including fear that marrying a FWD is perceived as someone of lower value, unable to play her role in society or marriage. Additionally, disability is often hidden from society, viewed as a source of familial shame. FWD express the view that this phenomenon is more prevalent in the lives of FWD than in male counterparts, as they view males with disability as more accepted in society and receiving of better opportunities. Moreover, FWD expressed the incidents of violence against FWD in their communities.

FWD perceive their reality to be very difficult compared to women without a disability. Around 58% of respondents believe that FWD experience verbal abuse more so than other women, a phenomenon perceived in 68% of the cases in the WB and GS compared to 36% of respondents in Lebanon. This issue was repeatedly raised by participants in focus groups, and was seen as limiting their access to, and ability to relate to society. 73% of respondents agree that FWD experience practices stemming from charity (49% in refugee camps in Lebanon, compared to 83% in the WB and GS.) This also represents the dominant charity-based attitude towards disability in general. Moreover, 35.2% of respondents also believe that FWD experience physical violence more than women without disability (25.4% in refugee camps in Lebanon, around 38% in the WB and GS), and 28.3% women feel that they are more likely to be sexually harassed. This was also confirmed through various experiences discussed in the focus groups, where women believed that their disability made them more prone to such experiences. Furthermore FWD feel they are more likely to be denied basic rights, including inheritance (28.7% in refugee camps in Lebanon, %47.4 in the WB and GS, 41.6% overall).

*"I was in a hospital one time, and found a mother who was there to have a hysterectomy for her daughter, who has a disability",*

*Focus group participant, Nablus, West Bank, 6/12/2012*

*A female with hearing disability expressed that taxi drivers mock her, and tell her she is beautiful and they want to marry her, thinking she doesn't understand what they say.*

*Focus group participant, Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, 23/12/2012*

Also upheld by the research was the literature's contention that FWD are more likely to be poor, undereducated and unemployed. In regards to education, 40% of survey respondents expressed that they had to stop their education against their own will. FWD expressed that they feel more isolated than other women and are less likely to leave their homes (36% in GS, 44.8% in the WB, and 14.7% in Lebanon). FWD in focus groups repeatedly expressed they do not go to public places due to what people say about them, further isolating them from their communities and limiting their inclusiveness within them. Again, and as seen in the literature, FWD perceive negative attitudes towards them in public places, where "acting normal" is sometimes seen negatively by society, creating barriers to interaction in public.

*"When I go to social events, I usually hear people saying why is she coming here, her legs are decayed. I even face negative views from my husband and family".*

*FWD Focus group participant, West Bank*

FWD also identified transportation as a major problem for them (67.4% refugee camps in Lebanon, around 84% WB and GS), limiting their access to public spaces. In a workshop analyzing survey results, participants expressed that they constantly faced problems with transportation due to lack of accessibility, economic situation, high transportation costs,

and negative attitudes . This in turn, affects their ability to reach organizations, or even take part in simple daily activities. Accessibility is a major problem facing FWD, as expressed by 54% of respondents in Lebanon, compared with 83% in the WB and 77% in the GS.

Regarding awareness of the Disability Law, 50% of respondents in the WB and GS have either simple information, or sufficient information about it, while 28% and 39% respectively have not heard of it. This demonstrates limited general awareness among FWD in regards to their rights. Many FWD expressed that because the law is not applied, they are less interested in it. Furthermore, 10% to 15% of respondents in all surveyed areas believed they had the possibility in various instances to officially complain about the breach of their rights.

FWD are active in civil society, with 31% of respondents being members of an organization in the Gaza Strip, compared to 22% in the WB, and 14.1% in Lebanon.

## **5.2 Interaction with Civil Society Organizations**

Based on the mainstreaming model developed by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), some steps are being taken by rights organizations to include FWD in their work. This effort is limited however to a small number of organizations, rather than being a general trend. In general most efforts are part of program mainstreaming, sensitization, workplace mainstreaming, and the direct involvement of FWD. This includes working on programs to make sure they are more inclusive to FWD, workshops and trainings for staff on disability related issues, working to remove environmental barriers in the workplace, and involvement of FWD in these processes. Most of these efforts, though minimal, do not usually target FWD as a group, and either target PWD, or women in general. The importance of using the mainstreaming model developed by VSO stems from it beginning at the policy level, and dealing with its components as inseparable.

Even with organizations that have staff with disability, there is no institutionalized or clear policy related to reasonable adjustment, and matters are usually dealt with on a case

by case basis. This is also the case in relation to interaction with FWD, and their access to these organizations, where the reality of FWD and the barriers they face, are not taken into consideration in programs and policies.

Attitudes of FWD towards civil society organizations seem generally, to be negative. Focus groups of FWD expressed how they face barriers related to accessibility when trying to acquire services, in addition to feeling ignored by organizations. This is also the case for many service providers directly related to disability, who themselves, do not address the issue of accessibility, even though they are expected to be advocating for it. Furthermore, some women who participate in civil society/ women's organizations feel that disability is not really on their agendas, and is only a minor issue. Survey results revealed that FWD feel excluded from the activities and policies of civil society, with 74.5% of respondents expressing the feeling that FWD are not included in programs and policies of organizations in general. This perception demonstrates the need to improve relations with FWD, and is supported by the literature, which finds that the lack of disability-sensitive policies further increases the exclusion of FWD from programs and services.

Survey results also show that FWD lack information or awareness of rights organizations. 52% of respondents have no information on women's organizations in the WB and GS, compared to 67.3% in Lebanon. 74.3% of respondents in Lebanon have no information related to human rights organizations, compared to 55.7% in the WB and GS.

Focus groups of FWD in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon expressed how the lack of organizational legal status from the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs prevents services provision. These communities mainly depend on UNRWA and local camp committees for their service needs, with most local rights and women's organizations not advocating for FWD. Furthermore, many participants expressed that they had raised complaints against some organizations and their treatment or approach of them as FWD.

FWD knowledge of organizations is usually due to field visits from disability organizations to their homes. FWD are usually reluctant to complain, fearful of responses from organizations and that nobody can do anything about their complaints. They further

feel they lack a formal body to which they can raise concerns and complaints due to the lack of a Palestinian national structure there.

Many FWD in the WB and GS expressed that human rights organizations do not play an active role, or are invisible to them and their needs in reality. There also was a lack of clarity regarding the role these organizations play in the community, in addition to a lack of trust in their work and services.

FWD also express that when they do complain, they face discrimination or assault, and would more likely seek help from family than from rights organization. Moreover, they see it as more difficult for a woman to file a complaint, and even more difficult for a FWD.

*"My friend once took me to a human rights organization to file a complaint, as my husband used to beat me, but I didn't, as I was afraid if he found out he would kill me"*

Focus group participant, Gaza Strip, 23/12/2012

Attitudinal and societal barriers play an important role in limiting interaction with rights organizations, in addition to the lack of faith that these interactions lead to favorable outcomes. This was further expressed in focus groups, where FWD stressed the importance of safety and anonymity in ensuring better interaction with rights organizations.

Nearly 90% of respondents expressed a perceived lack of information related to organizations and their roles. Furthermore around 74% of respondents in the WB and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon expressed that their families do not allow them to communicate with organizations, compared to 64% in the GS. Close to 80% of respondents overall express the perception that they face negative attitudes from organizations as a result of them being FWD. Furthermore, other barriers include the lack of trust in organizations, lack of awareness from organizations as to FWD rights, lack of awareness of FWD on their rights, in addition to inaccessibility, difficulty using transportation and fear of society. Furthermore, when asked which barriers present the

most challenges, lack of information, high financial costs, and fear of society were seen as most challenging.

### **5.3 Perceptions of Organizational Roles**

The survey attempted to shed light on how FWD would like to see the role of organizations in relation to their rights. Women were asked to respond as to which organizations they believe should focus on certain issues and rights, with choices including women's organizations, disability organizations, human rights organizations, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the police, UNRWA, the Shari'ah judiciary, and the civil judiciary. Raising awareness is seen as the domain of human rights organizations (33.8% in WB, 37% in the GS, 60.7% in refugee camps in Lebanon). It is also seen to be the role of disability organizations (33.3% in WB, 36% GS, and 24.7% in refugee camps in Lebanon). Respondents also saw disability organizations as playing the main role in enabling them to communicate with other organizations (35% WB, 36% GS, 43% Lebanon), reflecting how FWD view disability organizations as their main service providers and representatives. Disability organizations are seen as playing a main role in assisting FWD in getting jobs, assistance in obtaining an education, and working with civil society organizations towards achieving better accessibility. Less than 10% of respondents feel that women's organizations played the main role in protecting them from violence. The role of disability organizations is generally shared by many of the rights organizations interviewed. While the role of disability organizations is essential to the rights of FWD, viewing disability to be restricted to these organizations can create further barriers towards mainstreaming disability rights.

FWD also expressed that they feel that many organizations that are supposed to offer them services do not do so in reality, and are unknown to them generally.

Interviews carried out with organizations attempted to assess the inclusion of FWD in programs, policies, and practices. Accessibility was also assessed for staff with disability, and whether staff are trained regarding disability, whether FWD are consulted in their inclusion, and whether interventions are taken that include FWD.

Some of the organizations interviewed play an official role in cooperation with the government, such as the Independent Commission for Human Rights, the Palestinian General Union for PWD, and Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling.

Almost all organizations interviewed share the view that current cooperation between organizations could be improved, in addition to cooperation with government bodies. As outlined by the CRPD, this aspect is essential to achieving positive change in practice and interaction with PWD.

#### **5.4.1 Human Rights Organizations**

While most human rights organizations interviewed carry out some activities that target PWD, there is still limited action and interventions targeting FWD directly, and a lack of strategy or policy towards disability. Most human rights organizations interviewed focus on monitoring human rights, research, media programs, and legal services. These organizations view the issue of disability as a part of human rights in general, but there seems to be limited action ensuring equal access and participation of PWD in human rights organizations and their agendas. A number of human rights organizations focus on political issues and advocacy on the international level. There is also a view that disability is a specialized topic to be targeted by disability organizations specialized in disability-related issues. Furthermore, human rights organizations express that they receive complaints pertaining to FWD and their rights. These are usually referred to or addressed to official bodies, occasionally resulting in successes.

*“An FWD who had paralysis tried to attend a school, while the school rejected her due to her disability. We then contacted the school and official bodies and were able to get her back to school”*

Interview, 2/12/2012, Khalil Abu Shamaleh, Director, Al Dameer Human Rights Organization, Gaza Strip.

Respondents in the survey show a lack of faith in human rights organizations, particularly in relation to issues pertaining to their needs as FWD. 77% of respondents in the WB

either agree or agree to an extent, that human rights organizations do not take into consideration the rights of FWD, compared to 76% in the GS, and 70% amongst refugee camp dwellers in Lebanon.

Rights organizations also express problems due to the inactivity of the Palestinian Legislative Council, thus creating problems related to formulating and following up with disability laws.

Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of awareness amongst FWD regarding the role of human rights organization.

Human rights organizations express recognition of problems in fulfilling their roles. On the government level, there is negligence in relation to disability rights, with lack of finances usually expressed as a barrier. The perceived lack of legal awareness in the Palestinian community as a whole is also seen as contributing to the marginalization of PWD.

In regards to accessibility, while a small number of organizations visited do have accessible entrances, they are usually unused. In one instance, the accessible entrance to one of the organizations visited was locked. Around 25% of surveyed respondents expressed ignorance of human rights organizations and have no information on their role.

Almost all of human rights organizations interviewed had produced some form of report on PWD and their rights, include media programs on disability. Some had also conducted workshops and trainings, a phenomenon more prevalent than in activities of women organizations. While there were also a number of training workshops that targeted FWD and their rights directly however, these activities are not part of a general disability policy/strategy, but were part of legal awareness campaigns for marginalized groups.

In regards to complaints, a number of human rights organizations interviewed do have a complaints system where they legally follow up on complaints. Organizations expressed a number of barriers in following up on complaints including societal and familial barriers that prevent interventions particularly regarding sensitive issues, lack of follow

up on the official level, fear of filing complaints, and a lack of awareness of rights. Complaints related to FWD are received by these organizations, sometimes from FWD themselves and other times through disability related organizations. Some of these organizations also provide legal counseling services, and provide a lawyer for some of the complaints. FWD expressed the sentiment that favoritism in their communities also plays a role in preventing them from complaining, creating a lack of trust in complaint systems.

Three survey respondents in the West Bank had filed complaints to human rights organizations, with two of these related to accessibility issues, and one related to the nonresponse of an institution to a FWD request. One respondent expressed satisfaction that her complaint was dealt with due diligence. Furthermore, respondents who filed complaints to human rights organizations expressed difficulty in obtaining information on the appropriate procedures registering complaints, and meeting the relevant organizational personnel. No respondents from the GS or Lebanon filed complaints to human rights organizations.

The Independent Commission of Human Rights - an official commission founded in 1993 by presidential decree, and that reviews legislation and monitors and advises regarding issues of adherence to human rights, has provided trainings to their staff regarding the question of PWD. When interviewed, the Commission expressed the existence of a trend in the nature of complaints pertaining to PWD, describing these as usually related to exclusion from employment, health services, mobility and accessibility related issues. This led to the Commission beginning a national investigation on the issue of the PWD right to work. Reviews are currently being conducted on complaints filed while meeting with government officials to address main issues have also taken place. The consulting committee for the national investigation does include FWD.

FWD express the importance of human rights organizations making themselves known to the community, and being clear about the type of services they provide. They

also call for work to ensure that their programs and services are in fact effective, and that sufficient follow-up is carried out.

**Case:**

A FWD applied for a job and was told that she would be unfit to teach, without even looking at her papers, even though her disability would not affect her job performance. She then filed a complaint with a local human rights organization. This was done by filling out a questionnaire with a researcher working for that organization.

The researcher submitted the complaint to the local branch of a human rights organization and attempted to keep contact with the researcher to follow up the case. She was consistently told that the issue is in process of being followed up, and that she will be notified if anything comes up. This persisted for a year to no avail and she no longer calls them to follow up on the issue.

**Case:**

A woman with a visual disability from a village in the West Bank, applied for a teaching post south of Nablus. Over time she felt that she was excluded from fair consideration for the position and requested to see an official, who in turn refused to meet her. She then consulted a local disability organization, which said they could not help her. She then took her concern to a local radio station and discussed her problem. The official who had refused to meet her called the radio show while she was on air, and said he was not willing to hire someone with her degree of impairment. She then filed a complaint with a human rights organization and attempted to follow up on her complaint, but never got a response on the status of her complaint. She is currently still thinking of ways to follow up on her complaint, keeping in mind that this case stemmed from 2012.

## **5.4.2 Disability Organizations**

FWD largely interact with disability-related organizations. 42% of respondents surveyed from the West Bank and Gaza Strip are members of the Palestinian General Union for PWD (51% in the WB, and 30.7% in the GS). The union is currently being established in Lebanon and 10% of the respondents there are members. The union plays a role in providing health insurance to PWD, explaining the higher participation rate in the union, in comparison to other organizations. It is also important to note that only 9% of respondents expressed that they had not heard of disability-related organizations. When compared with women and human rights organizations, FWD are more aware of disability organizations, confirming the predominant view whereby disability organizations are seen as the main organizations that work with PWD. However, 59.1% of all respondents expressed the sentiment that there is discrimination in disability organizations against FWD. This is supported by the literature, which finds that FWD are often excluded or discriminated against by the disability movement, whereby PWD are usually dealt with as a homogenous group. Only one organization interviewed directly targets FWD, provides empowerment services such as training and capacity building. Furthermore, as expressed in interviews with women and human rights organizations, disability organizations are seen by civil society organizations as representatives of PWD and their needs. The Palestinian General Union for People with Disabilities has female representation in their elections in all of their offices, in addition to female representation in the board of directors. Additionally, the union is part of several committees related to women in the government, such as the Women's Employment Committee in the Ministry of Labor. The union however, usually refers complaints pertaining to disability to relevant organizations. An interview with the National Institute for Rehabilitation in the Gaza Strip noted that the organization had met with other women's organizations with many failing to include FWD in their programs, believing it to be the work of disability organizations. Survey results also showed that three complaints were filed to disability organizations in the WB, compared with none in the GS and Lebanon. All three respondents expressed satisfaction that their complaints were taken seriously.

FWD also expressed the sentiment that many disability organizations do not in reality empower them, but instead exploited them, by benefitting from their membership, but failing to take their input seriously. There is also the view that organizations do not

recognize the unique and additional barriers they face as FWD, and are thus discriminated against within the disability movement.

**Case:**

An interview with one FWD noted that many FWD experience fear when interacting with small disability-related organizations, as they are not taken seriously, and decisions are not reached in a participatory manner. She also noted that one of her friends was the only female member in a disability committee, whose voice was never heard, outnumbered by her male counterparts, who always assumed that she would be of the same opinion as them. (Telephone interview, FWD, 3/4/2013)

**5.4.3 Women Organizations**

Interviewed women's organizations offer a variety of services to women in Palestinian communities including providing small loans/ grants, awareness raising, capacity building, political participation, legal consultation services, safe houses, research, and media programs. It is important to note however that FWD often seem to be excluded from the programs of women's organizations, with limited programs that target FWD directly. This is also expressed in the literature, whereby FWD are likely to be excluded from the women's movement.. As with human rights organizations, there is no comprehensive effort to ensure participation of FWD, given the general assumption that FWD face similar barriers as those of women in general. In one interview, a director of a women's organization expressed shame in regards to this issue, as women's organizations have the obligation to represent all women, regardless of their differences. Some programs target FWD and coordinate with disability organizations. These are limited however, and not part of a general strategy or policy. 50.3% of respondents surveyed expressed the feeling that women's organizations do not consider FWD-related issues, and there seems to be no real effort on the part of many women's organizations to improve this.

Additionally, around 30% of respondents expressed that they had not heard of any women's organizations.

Nonetheless, FWD do demonstrate participation in women's related activities, with around one third of those surveyed in the WB, GS and Lebanon participating in activities related to women, and almost a third participating in activities related to the rights of women with disabilities.

Most women's organizations interviewed had limited interaction with FWD as a group, but had interacted with individual FWD, or as part of select programs/ activities.

The Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling provides protection for women from violence, in cooperation with the police and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Despite having a complaint system, not many FWD actually file. Furthermore, despite having a safe house, it is currently not accessible.

*“In one case, we were unable to provide the safe house service to a female with disability, as it is not yet accessible, however we are working towards including FWD and making interventions”*

Interview, Rawan Obeid, Women Center for Legal Aid and Counseling,  
Ramallah, West Bank.

In some cases, women who asked for protection were sometimes taken to disability-related organizations. The issue of women with disability and protection from violence, is currently being discussed with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

As part of the continuing experiences of FWD facing exclusion, the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling began reviewing legislation related to women, and are forming a group of FWD to listen to their needs, and to work towards mainstreaming.

Furthermore, in reviewing the National Strategy for Eliminating Violence against Women, women with disabilities seem to be missing, with the prevalent attitude towards them being one that is largely medically oriented or charity based.

FWD are thus excluded to a large extent from the agendas of women's organizations. Recognizing the barriers that limit FWD access and participation in programs and services of women's organizations should be addressed, entailing specifically working on ensuring accessibility and participation of FWD in all programs/services.

**CASE:**

An FWD and her friend learned of a 17-year old woman with intellectual disability being domestically abused by her father and brothers. The two women tried to find a safe place for the young woman and contacted a women's organization. The organization noted that they would not take on the case without recommendation from the Ministry of Social Affairs. The women who attempted to contact the organization expressed their own disappointment with the decision of the organizations which they felt had the obligation to at least help coordinate the concern with official bodies.

**5.4.4 UNRWA**

UNRWA is the main service provider for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. UNRWA devised its policies towards PWD in 1992 based on a developmental vision of disability. The Agency provides rehabilitation and capacity building services, and works in partnership with the Palestinian Disability Commission, a coordinating body consisting of a number of Palestinian organizations. Currently, partnerships between these groups are attempting to work towards providing disability accessibility in schools. However, the priority of this program has been relegated behind the rebuilding of Nahr al Bared refugee camp. Survey results showed that only two respondents filed complaints with civil society organizations, with both going to UNRWA. One expressed satisfaction with the manner in which it was dealt with, while both expressed difficulty in the process of filing complaints, and felt they experienced negative attitudes from workers towards them. 64% of respondents expressed similar sentiments of negativity from among UNRWA workers towards FWD.

**5.5 Intervention Strategies:**

More than 90% of respondents found the following to be important intervention strategies capable of enhancing access to women, human rights and disability organizations for FWD:

- Advocacy with official bodies for application of PWD and FWD rights
- Forming support groups related to the rights of FWD
- Having a special unit in human rights and women's organizations focusing on the issues and rights of FWD
- Involvement of FWD in formulating policies and programs
- Development of accessible, awareness-raising materials
- Development of a training program on the rights of FWD to various involved parties
- Development of a monitoring system documenting all legal, attitudinal, and environmental barriers that limit access of FWD
- Development of legal consultation services for FWD (hotlines, branch offices, etc.)
- Development of protection from violence services, by developing safe houses in a way which allows FWD to make use of these services
- Strengthening the access of FWD to justice services by strengthening rehabilitation programs and providing needed assistive devices.

When asked to choose the most important intervention strategy, the advocacy with official bodies for application of rights was seen as the most important among respondents (26% in the WB, 30% in the GS, and 44% in Lebanon). Analytical groups also noted the formation of support groups related to the issues and rights of FWD as one of the most important strategies of advocacy, given that communication between FWDs is essential to better organize efforts.

## **6.1 Conclusions:**

Both governmental and non-governmental organizations are responsible for ensuring equality in rights within a community. This is particularly important when interacting with marginalized groups such as FWD whose inclusion should entail recognizing their unique experiences, and whose input should be essential to the process of development overall. This begins by recognizing and working to address the different kinds of barriers they face, beginning with those in the family, to those of accessibility of organizations, transportation, attitudes towards disability, economic conditions, the denial of rights, and the lack of awareness or information on rights organizations. Such efforts would have to involve the government and civil society as a whole, in addition to advocating for clear and inclusive laws that recognize and protect the rights of FWD. One of the main issues that was mentioned by the many organizations interviewed and FWD is that they would like to see better cooperation between organizations themselves, and the government. Furthermore, it is apparent that there is a lack of inclusion of FWD in organizations, starting with policy, as there are no serious strategies for full mainstreaming of FWD. Programs are thus not designed in an inclusive manner. For this to happen, FWD need to be involved in the process from the beginning, assessing policies and programs from their perspective, in addition to unifying efforts between organizations. Moreover, FWD feel that the services provided by civil society organizations are time consuming, weak in follow up, and fail to reflect awareness of the barriers FWD face in different aspects of their lives.

The obstacles FWD face in regards to accessing civil society organizations can be divided into four main themes:

**1. Attitudinal Barriers:**

- Discrimination within the family, including being treated differently from other siblings
- Family control over decisions and behavior. (Around 74% of respondents in the WB and Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon express that their families do not allow them to communicate with organizations, compared to 64% in the GS)

- Public attitudes in general, which exclude and limit access of FWD to public space
- Attitudes of drivers that limit the access of FWD to transportation
- Attitudes of organizational staff towards FWD, preventing them from accessing services equally to others. (Almost 80% of respondents expressed the sentiment that they confronted negative attitudes of organizations as a result of them being FWD)
- Lack of awareness among FWD regarding their rights, in addition to a lack of awareness of organizations and the community in general about FWD and their rights

## **2. Institutional Barriers:**

- Lack of information related to organizations, their services and roles. (Close to 90% of respondents expressed a lack of information about organizations and their roles)
- Lack of FWD trust in organizations and the services they provide
- Unclear processes, slow services, and a lack of follow-up on issues pertaining to FWD
- Lack of clear and inclusive policies towards disability
- Lack of involvement of FWD in assessing accessibility of organizations/ programs/ services

## **3. Financial Barriers:**

- the need for costly special transportation for many FWD

## **Environmental Barriers:**

- Lack of accessibility in building facilities of organizations. Even organizations that do have accessibility often times do not maintain them to standard
- Lack of accessibility in public spaces, infrastructure, disability parking, etc.
- Lack of accessible public transportation for FWD

## **6.2 Recommendations:**

The following recommendations are suggested for enhancing FWD access to civil society:

### **Raising Awareness:**

- Developing awareness-raising campaigns targeting families of FWD that address the role they can play in FWD empowerment
- Developing awareness raising campaigns that support FWD in knowing their rights, the role of different organizations, and encouraging access to public space
- Developing awareness raising campaigns that target various segments of the community to build a general understanding of disability as a rights issue, and to expand the number of advocates for FWD
- Developing accessible awareness-raising campaigns on the role of rights organizations and different government bodies
- Creating support groups consisting of FWD and advocates for their rights, to allow for better communication between FWD themselves and the public

### **Disability Mainstreaming in Organizations:**

- Incorporating the rights and issues of FWD in the policies and strategies of organizations, based on a rights-based approach
- Making sure organizational staff are trained and aware of rights-based approaches to disability
- Removing barriers within the organization that limit the access of FWD to their services
- Incorporating the rights and issues of FWD in program design, and assessing programs by FWD to ensure inclusiveness
- Meaningful involvement of FWD in policy formulation, program design, and monitoring practices
- Re-assessing services to ensure equal and full participation of FWD
- Employing staff with disability, as per the Palestinian law for PWD

- Recognizing that PWD are not a homogenous group, and thus face different kinds of barriers which need to be addressed as such

### **Cooperation Between Organizations:**

- Ensuring unified approaches and strategies between various rights organizations towards issues of FWD, and cooperation between rights organizations
- Advocacy with the government for application of laws, and issues of FWD

### **Creating Opportunities for FWD:**

- Participants in analytical workshops stressed the issues of employment and education, and the importance of providing better opportunities for FWD, in cooperation with the government
- Identifying and removing barriers towards accessing basic services for FWD, such as education, health, and employment
- Employment of PWD within rights organizations, and recognizing that the Palestinian Disability Law compels governmental and nongovernmental organizations to employ PWD as 5% of their staff

### **Protection Services**

- Monitoring the rights and abuses of FWD, following up and documenting abuses, and reevaluating complaints and follow-up processes
- Providing accessible legal consultation services for FWD
- Providing protection services such as safe houses which are accessible, and ensuring these can be easily used by FWD
- Working with official bodies to ensure quick and dependable services
- Advertising all services while ensuring anonymity and protection

## 7.1 References

- About Us, The Independent Commission for Human Rights. , <<http://www.ichr.ps/en/2/2/251/About-Us-About-Us.htm>> [Accessed April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013]
- Habib, Lina (1997). Gender And Disability: Women's Experiences In The Middle East. Oxford Atlantic Highlands, N.J: Oxfam Humanities Press distributor.
- M. Fine & A. Asch. (1989), Women With Disabilities: Essays In Psychology, Culture, And Politics, p.245-268
- Mitra, S. (2006), The Capability Approach and Disability, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, p. 236-247.
- Norad. (2012). Mainstreaming Disability in the New Development Paradigm Evaluation of Norwegian Support to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Norad Website: <<http://www.norad.no/no/resultater/publikasjoner/evalueringer/publikasjon?key=389256>>. [Accessed on: 02 October 2012.]
- Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics. (2011). People with Disabilities Survey 2011, Main Results Report. (Arabic).
- Jaeger, Paul T. (2008). Understanding Disability: Inclusion, Access, Diversity, and Civil Rights. Westport: ABC-CLIO.
- Khan, Mushtaq. (2004). State Formation in Palestine: Viability and Governance during a Social Transformation. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Lonsdale, Susan. (1990). Women And Disability: The Experience Of Physical Disability Among Women. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
- Fiduccia, Barbara, and Leslie R. Wolfe. (1999) Women and girls with disabilities defining the issues : an overview. Washington, DC: Center for Women Policy Studies and Women & Philanthropy.

- Lord, Janet E. (2007). Human rights. YES! Action And Advocacy On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Human Rights Center.
- Union of Palestinian Women Committees. <<http://www.upwc.org.ps/>> [Accessed April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013]
- United Nations (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. New York, USA.
- Vision, Mission and Goals, Al Haq. Web. Accessed April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, <<http://www.alhaq.org/about-al-haq/vision-mission-and-goals>>
- VSO (2006). A Handbook on Mainstreaming Disability. [www.vso.org.uk/Images/Disability\\_DREAM-IT\\_Mainstreaming\\_Handbook\\_tcm8-8411.pdf](http://www.vso.org.uk/Images/Disability_DREAM-IT_Mainstreaming_Handbook_tcm8-8411.pdf) [Accessed on October 10th, 2012]
- VSO (2006). A Handbook on Mainstreaming Disability. [www.vso.org.uk/Images/Disability\\_DREAM-IT\\_Mainstreaming\\_Handbook\\_tcm8-8411.pdf](http://www.vso.org.uk/Images/Disability_DREAM-IT_Mainstreaming_Handbook_tcm8-8411.pdf) [Accessed on October 10th, 2012]
- Boylan, Esther. *Women and disability*. London: Zed Books, 1991. Print.
- World Bank. (2005) A Note on Disability Issue in the Middle East and North Africa. [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/MENA/ME\\_NADisabilities.doc](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/MENA/ME_NADisabilities.doc) [Accessed on October 10rd, 2012].