



# Disability rights: giving Palestinian women a voice

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**Abstract:** Palestinian women and girls with disabilities face double discrimination based on their gender and physical conditions which disadvantages them in education, work and daily life. Here, they tell their stories of struggle and resilience.

In Palestine, as in many other societies, women and girls with disabilities remain absent from public discussions. Daily challenges and double discrimination based on gender and disability means they face restricted choices and weakened opportunities for participation in society.

This blog sheds light on their experiences through official data, cultural and social context and personal testimony, focusing on their often overlooked voices, because their rights and dignity must be at the heart of any conversation about equality and justice.

## Double discrimination

Girls and women with disabilities in Palestine face double marginalisation on grounds of gender and their disability. In many communities, disability is still misunderstood and

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sometimes hidden out of shame, while women's rights are already constrained by traditional gender roles and social expectations. This combination creates layers of exclusion from education and healthcare to employment and independent living.

There are approximately 115,000 persons with disabilities in Palestine, 59,000 in the West Bank and 58,000 in Gaza Strip, representing about 2.1 percent of the population. Nearly 46 percent of children with disabilities (aged 6–17) were not enrolled in education. The illiteracy rate among persons with disabilities aged 10 and above stands at 32 percent, with a stark gender gap: 46 percent of females are illiterate compared to 20 percent of males.

Unemployment among those with disabilities remains critically high. In 2019, the unemployment rate was 37 percent among people with disabilities aged 15+, 19 percent in the West Bank and 54 percent in Gaza. While this statistic is not gender-specific, it is widely recognised that women with disabilities face more severe challenges accessing employment than both men with disabilities and women without disabilities, pointing to a likely much wider employment gap. By comparison, the overall unemployment rate among women in Palestine is 40 percent, while it is 20 percent for men.

Noor, a visually impaired woman from the West Bank with a Master's degree in Gender Studies shares her insights and lived experiences as a woman with a disability in Palestine.

As long as we live in a society that still doesn't see us as equal to others, it won't give us the same opportunities and rights. This places an additional burden on us. We're expected to constantly prove ourselves, teach people how to interact with us, and how to accept us. And that can be exhausting at times.

Women and girls with disabilities face multiple layers of exclusion shaped by social structures, cultural stigma and unequal access to services. Limited awareness of their rights, low education, and dependence on others further increase their vulnerability, especially to violence and discrimination.

Cultural stigma deeply shapes the personal lives of women and girls with disabilities, especially when it comes to marriage and family. Disability is still often seen as a source of shame or pity, with many families overly protective or isolating their daughters from public and social life. Thus, women with disabilities are frequently viewed as less desirable brides and their right to choose whether or whom to marry is often restricted or dismissed. Not only negative views about disability but also traditional gender roles place an even greater burden on women with disabilities.

No official data is available on the number of women with disabilities in Palestine who are married or have children. However, a 2019 survey found 37 percent of ever-married women with disabilities reported experiencing violence by their spouses within a single year, suggesting that a significant number are indeed married.

## **Everyday empowerment**

Empowerment for women with disabilities begins long before they enter a classroom or workplace. It starts when a girl is treated with respect, spoken to with belief in her potential, included in family conversations and decisions and when families nurture autonomy instead of pity and overprotection.

For many Palestinian women and girls with disabilities, daily life is a struggle. Empowerment must enable them to carry out everyday household tasks, express personal preferences and make decisions about their bodies, roles and futures, having a say in how they live, study, work, and manage relationships.

Marriage is often treated as something decided for women with disabilities, if it happens at all. Social stigma, overprotective families and assumptions about their capacity can undermine their ability to make decisions for themselves. They deserve the right to choose to marry with dignity or not at all. Noor adds: 'From the beginning, what mattered most to me when it came to marriage was the right to choose, not just the right to get married'.

Empowerment also means inclusive education, building skills and confidence, and accessible healthcare, supporting physical and mental well-being. Fair employment opportunities provide not just income, but self-worth. Public spaces that are physically and socially accessible enable movement and participation. Noor says:

For me, the most essential aspect of empowerment is independence, the freedom to go wherever and whenever I want, in my own way and at my own pace...being able to ask for help comfortably, without feeling embarrassed and managing my personal affairs on my own.

## **Programmes alone not enough**

In recent years, many organisations in Palestine have taken meaningful steps to include girls and women with disabilities. These efforts are vital, but programmes alone are not enough.

For empowerment to continue and deepen, these initiatives must be supported by a wider network of accessible and sustainable services. Girls and women with disabilities need more than workshops; they need physically accessible community centres, safe spaces to gather, trained professionals who understand disability and gender and long-term psychosocial support. They also need inclusive transportation, communication tools and healthcare services.

Without these surrounding services, even the most well-designed programmes can lose momentum. Empowerment is not a one-off but process requiring support at every stage of life. We must move beyond short-term interventions and invest in sustainable inclusive systems. Noor says:

Women and girls with disabilities must be genuinely involved in planning these projects. This means holding inclusive social planning sessions at various levels, not dictating the plan to them, but allowing the beneficiaries themselves to shape and build it.

### **Changing the narrative**

Empowerment also means rewriting the way we think and speak about women and girls with disabilities. Too often, society defines them by what they cannot do, focusing on limitations instead of possibilities. Noor says:

What has changed in society regarding women and girls with disabilities is...just the surface. But in our deeper honest thinking, in how we truly reflect on ourselves, we as a society have not really changed.

Changing the narrative begins with seeing women with disabilities as full individuals—not as burdens nor symbols of inspiration but as people with rights, dreams and contributions to make. It means challenging stereotypes that claim they are too fragile to marry, too dependent to raise children or too limited to lead. This shift must happen at home, in schools and within feminist movements: feminism cannot be inclusive if it leaves disability behind.

Policymakers, educators, social workers, media creators and activists all have a role to play. Most importantly, women with disabilities must be at the forefront of telling their own stories, shaping the spaces they live in and participating in every decision that affects their lives. It is not about speaking for them but creating conditions for their voices to be heard, respected and followed.

We must create more safe spaces where girls and women with disabilities in Palestine can share their stories, support one another and advocate for change. These spaces must not only be physically accessible but emotionally and socially inclusive, where women feel heard, respected and valued for who they are.

This requires broader commitment from institutions, families, and communities alike. Awareness campaigns, inclusive policies, and open dialogue are essential to challenge stigma and reshape how we view disability and gender.

Organisations must invest in long-term projects in addition to accessible services that meet the real needs of women with disabilities in their homes, relationships and communities. Families must be empowered to raise girls with disabilities in ways that affirm their independence and right to choose while society as a whole must recognise that every woman, regardless of ability, has the right to love, marry and to live with dignity and self-determination.