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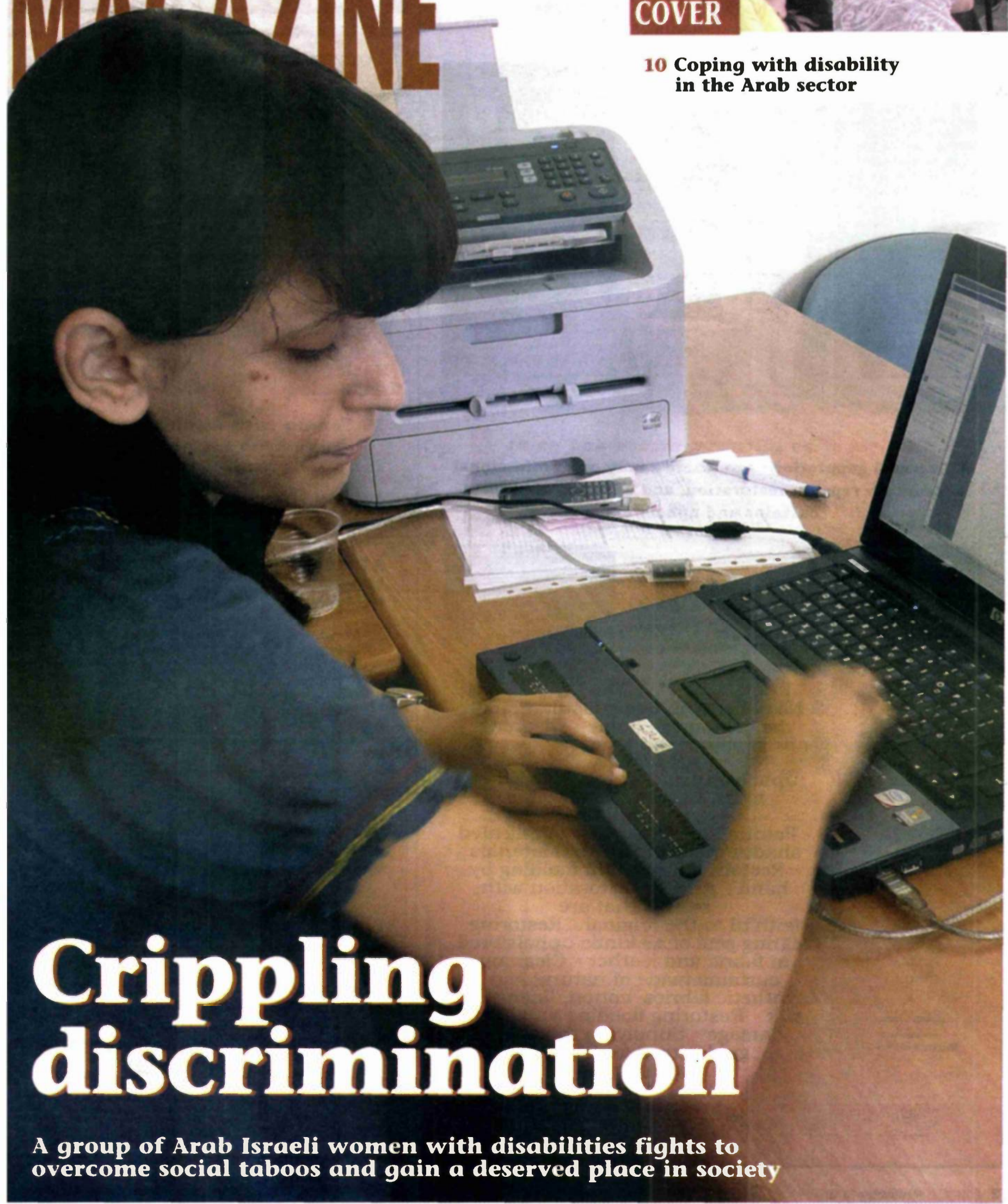


(Ruth Eolash)

COVER

10 Coping with disability in the Arab sector

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Crippling discrimination

A group of Arab Israeli women with disabilities fights to overcome social taboos and gain a deserved place in society



DISABLED WOMEN gather for a group session.

Disabled – yet perfectly able

Despite the challenges they face, a group of Arab Israeli women with disabilities are determined to find their place in society and be successful at the same time

• Text and photos: RUTH EGLASH

It's a Wednesday morning at the Al-Tufula Center in downtown Nazareth. While the center is usually the place to go for young mothers looking to join the workforce or for advice in family matters – there is a preschool on the premises – the group meeting at the center today has a much more specific aim: empowering Arab women with various types and degrees of disability to participate more fully in their society.

"There are ways for you to apply for funding for your projects," explains a young Jewish Israeli man, addressing the group in Hebrew and informing the women, mostly with covered heads, of some of the foundations and organizations that provide assistance to small businesses.

He is from the Keren Shemesh Foundation, a non-prof-

it organization that assists talented young entrepreneurs to transform a good idea into a successful sustainable business. The women ask questions and seem delighted with the knowledge that there is someone who might be interested in supporting their businesses and ideas for social projects.

The 15 or so participants are in a program called Women with Disabilities run by the Al-Tufula Center in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)'s Masira-Journey program.

"This group is for academic women," explains Samar Abu Kirshien, coordinator of the program. "At this stage, most of the women are at advanced stages of developing their business idea or community project. Two of the women are working on community projects and five have business plans already."

As Abu Kirshien talks, her head moves but her eyes do

Overcoming the barriers

According to Hana Shalata, a 31-year-old resident of Sakhnin who suffers from blindness caused by optic atrophy, Arab women with disabilities should never give up their efforts to become fully contributing members of society.

Shalata's own story is inspiring. Born blind, the young woman overcame almost every barrier in her path and in recent years has fulfilled her personal ambition to help other women with disabilities by managing the Center for Independent Living, a JDC-supported community empowerment project in her town.

"I have to help these young women to get up and fight," says the charismatic Shalata, who in addition to being gainfully employed has also completed two academic degrees – a bachelor of arts from the University of Haifa and a second degree in social work from Bar-Ilan University.

"All people with disabilities face barriers, but most of them we can deal with," she says matter-of-factly.

Although clearly a positive and determined character, Shalata adds that the biggest barrier facing Arab women with disabilities is the one imposed by their society.

"I never felt that I was not able to do something," she philosophizes. "I learned how to study, went to university, made my own friends and went out for fun. The main barriers that were the hardest to overcome were those forced on us by our own society."

She cites finding work as one good example. "There were moments when I felt like giving up," recalls Shalata. "But I could not allow myself to do it. Even when I was at the end and there was nothing, it made me even more determined to move forward."

She continues: "My whole life is filled with challenges but there is nothing I can do about it, I cannot hide from my disabilities or from the challenges around me. I have no choice but to confront them."

While Shalata is confident that she can help other disabled women become productive members of society too, she falters when asked about the taboo of these women finding husbands or starting their own families.

"This is a subject that I always knew would be impossible. Women with disabilities in Arab society cannot find a husband," she states resignedly. "A boyfriend maybe but it will never amount to anything because after a few years his family will make him break off the relations with the woman."

"The role of the woman is to clean the house and take care of the children; how can a blind woman or a woman in a wheelchair take care of these things?" she asks sarcastically.

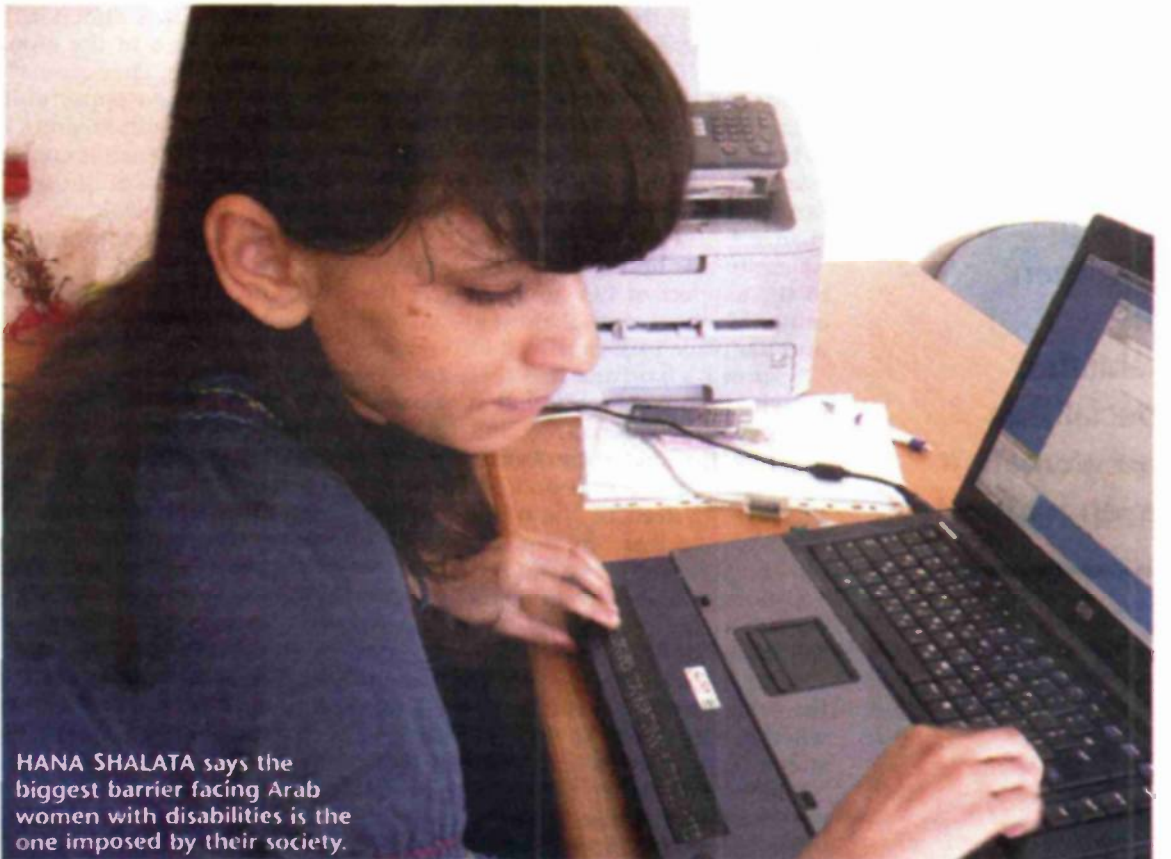
Talking about her own personal experience, Shalata adds: "I had a boyfriend for a few years and even though his father loved me and welcomed me into their home, he never thought I could be his son's wife. How would I be able to keep his son's house clean and raise his son's children?"

After a short pause, Shalata says she has come to accept her fate.

"It does not make my life any more difficult [not having a family]. I have a disability and I have to accept the outcome of that," she says, adding, "I would prefer to stay single than be forced to marry a man I do not love or who is not normal just because I am blind."

"I have accepted that this is a fact of my life. I am working to change many things, but how many things in society can you realistically change?" she concludes.

– R.E.



HANA SHALATA says the biggest barrier facing Arab women with disabilities is the one imposed by their society.

not, and it quickly becomes clear that she is visually impaired. Despite her own disability, she tells me that she has made it her life's mission to help other Arab women with disabilities to break society's taboos against working outside the home and to function as independent human beings in all spheres of the community.

Arab women with disabilities are discriminated against on three levels, states the 36-year-old, who was born sighted but started losing her vision at the age of eight or nine.

"Firstly, we are talking about women, and women in Arab society have a different standing to the men, so there are challenges for them as women. And secondly, they have a disability, so they are seen as weak and not capable. And thirdly, they are Arabs living in Israeli society," continues Abu Kirshien, who has a bachelor's degree in education and sociology and a master's in social work, both from the University of Haifa.

"Most of the women here have a high academic level but their chance of finding work is almost impossible," she explains, adding "it is just not acceptable for these women to be independent and work outside the home. While it is becoming more common in our society for young women to live alone, those with disabilities do not have the power to fight this additional battle."

Contrary to this, Abu Kirshien did have the support and encouragement of her own family, and she believes that thanks to programs like this one, which provides both a support network and empowerment, the situation could change, at least when it comes to finding employment or future opportunities.

"There are some families, like mine, that believe in the abilities of their disabled daughters, but there are those who refuse to accept that the women can ever be independent," Abu Kirshien says. "Of course there is love for them but sometimes the families give too much love and are over-protective. This stops them from progressing."

She adds: "The minute there are more women with disabilities visible in our community, there will be more connection and more understanding of the situation. Hopefully it will change the way people respond to them."

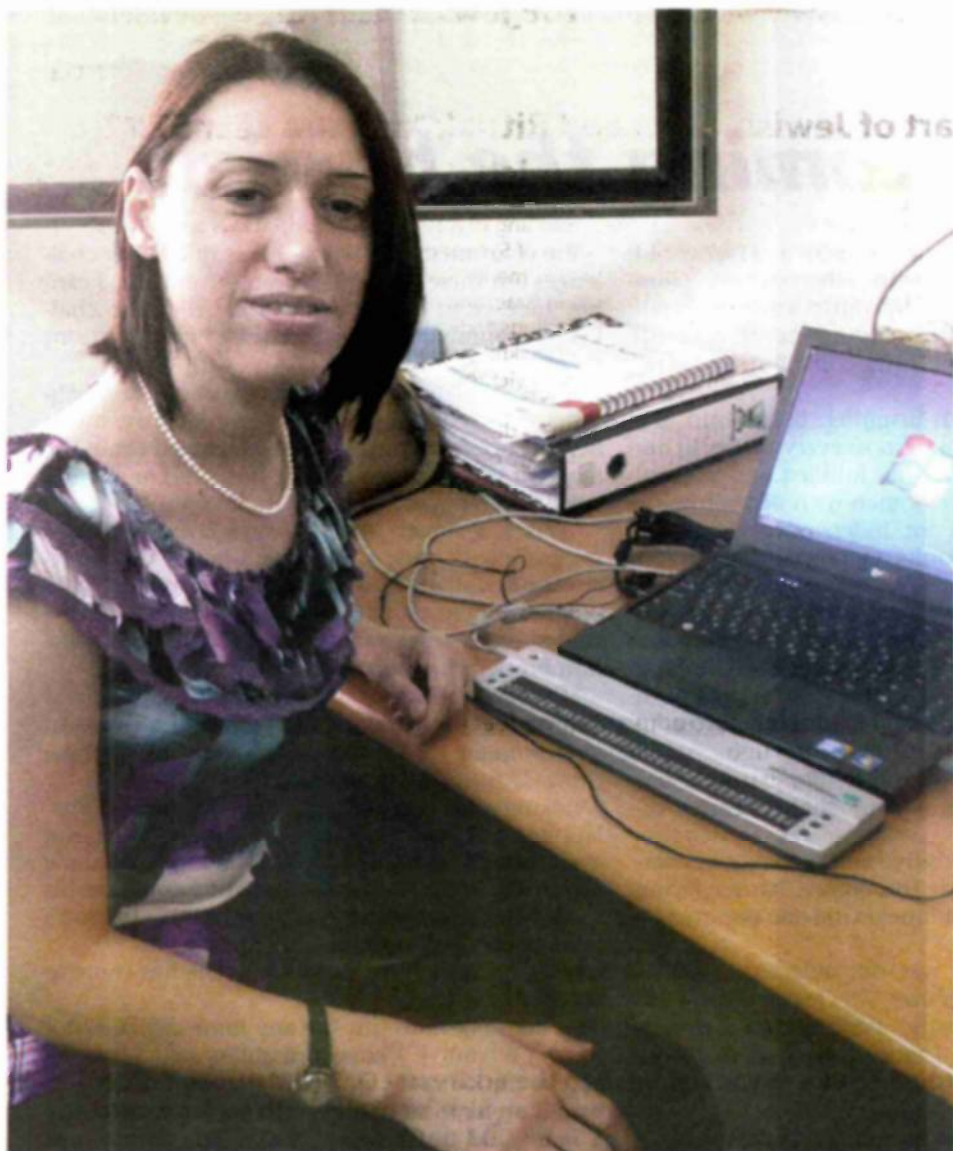
ONE OF the group's participants is 37-year-old Inam Zoabi from the nearby village of Tamra. She finished her masters degree at the University of Haifa more than five years ago, and despite her ample qualifications, has yet to find any work at all.

"Society in general does not accept people with disabilities, and for women with disabilities, especially an Arab woman with a disability, it is even harder," says Zoabi, who has suffered from vision problems all her life and lost her sight completely when she was in her 20s.

"People are just not aware of what we go through; they are not frightened of us but they do not know how to relate to us. I have even reached the conclusion that I need to teach people how to respond to me. I need to go out there and talk to people, be open and help them to get to know me."

Zoabi hopes to create a community project in her village that will empower women and people with disabilities by encouraging them to become more independent. Although she has yet to decide on the format such a program will take, the young woman says defiantly: "I want people to realize that I am just like everyone else; I have the same ability to work like any other person. I want to let people know that they should not be scared"

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SAMAR ABU KIRSHIEN, coordinator of the Women with Disabilities program, has made it her life's mission to help others.



A WOMAN helps her daughter with her prosthetic leg.

(Reuters)

'Society in general does not accept people with disabilities, and for women with disabilities, especially an Arab woman, it is even harder'

of me just because I have a disability."

After some thought, Zoabi adds: "I think that every employer wants someone who will work to the best of their ability and they think that a person with a disability might not work like it needs to be done. I wish that someone would at least just give us a chance to see that we can be the best. No one gave me the chance."

Despite this negative reflection, thanks to the support of her group here at the center, Zoabi is optimistic that she will find her place in society.

"I know it's hard and that there are people who do not accept us, but at university I overcame the barriers and I believe that now I can overcome society's barriers and change the way people react to us," she says. "I need to show other people that I can do this. No one else will help me except myself," she adds.

Although Zoabi's countenance brightens when she talks about her plans for the future and her determination to succeed in the workplace, when asked about the other challenges she faces, including whether she plans to get married and start a family, her voice falters slightly.

"Honestly, I never had the chance to get married because I never got any offers," she says. "A few years ago I really wanted to get married and have children,

but now I don't really care because I am moving in a new direction."

Other women in the group share similar sentiments. They are excited and energized by the new opportunities regarding work or even volunteering in their communities, but when it comes to the more intimate aspects of life such as finding a partner, having children or even running their own household, the women's faces cloud over.

"I dream of having children one day," comments 33-year-old Abtsam Amara from Kafr Kanna, who has already seen success with a women's fashion business she started less than a year ago.

"I am lucky. I have many friends and a good family that helps me, but when I am alone, when I go into my bedroom and close the door, I cry because of my fate," she says.

Unlike most of the other women in the group, Amara is not vision impaired but suffered a serious accident when she was a child, damaging her left leg. She has undergone 17 operations over the past 25 years.

"You cannot see my disability from the outside, but if I lift up my pants you will see all the scars," she says, frowning. "Everyone in my community thinks I am fine and that I am receiving money from the National Insurance Institute and that

should be enough for me but it is not enough. We want to live a normal life like everyone else."

"There is a very slim chance for an Arab woman with a disability to get married," agrees the group's coordinator Abu Kirshien. "There are a few who manage to get married but it is very unusual, and sometimes the women are forced to marry men who are violent or who also have a disability."

She philosophizes that the barriers preventing these women from living a normative life like most others in society – including working and starting a family – stem mostly from the stigmas and not from the religious restrictions.

"Religious law allows disabled women to marry," she says, adding that she herself has received some marriage proposals but thanks to her family's support has been able to turn them down because they were not suitable.

"Some of the women's families support them and help them move forward in life," says Abu Kirshien. "Luckily for me, my family listened to me and supported me. At first they only wanted to protect me but I refused to let them shield me all the time and when they saw that I really wanted to be independent and saw that I could achieve it, they also started to believe in my abilities."

The silenced voices

When it first opened in 1984, Nazareth's Al-Tufula Center was revolutionary in its work with early childhood development and for its empowerment of Arab women, enabling them to go out to work while someone else cared for their babies.

"In the beginning we started by training early childhood caregivers but soon we realized that we had to work in every area of empowerment for women," commented Nabila Espanioly, the center's director.

As the center's work developed and they began to reach more and more women, Espanioly discovered a group that was completely invisible in mainstream Arab society: women with disabilities.

"I called them the silent voices," she says, observing that many of the women had never before had the chance to participate in the world around them.

"Each the women that comes here is a story by herself," says Espanioly. "Each woman has a different obstacle to overcome and we cannot even imagine the challenges they face. When I wake up, I get dressed, get in my car and I drive to work without really thinking about it, but for them, these simple tasks are huge barriers."

She continues: "Arab women with disabilities are discriminated against three times, they are part of a minority, they are women and they face internal discrimination in our society because of their disability. The community as a whole lacks the knowledge of how to deal with its own marginalized groups in society."

While there are many reasons for this internal discrimination, Espanioly believes that at the core of the problem is fear within families that their daughters will be mistreated and they are very over-protective to compensate.

"They are afraid their children will be abused but often the over-protecting becomes paralyzing," she points out, adding that, in addition, parents feel ashamed or guilty and blame themselves for their child's disability and often try to keep them hidden at home.

"The layers of the problem are very deep and there are so many areas that we need to focus on to tackle this," says Espanioly, adding that improving their lives begins with the women themselves.

"The women must accept their disabilities but they must also be shown that they can become full and active participants in their communities and in society in general," she says. "The women must organize and empower themselves and in this group we are helping them to do that."

— R.E.



(Illustrative photo: Marc Israel Sellem)