



The Stigma Attached to Disability is an Anathema to Religion

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The “Gendered Disabilities” project is aimed at highlighting the need to support people with disabilities and the Muslim families caring for such persons. The project is rooted in the belief that every individual is equal regardless of the specific set of abilities they are able to utilize in life. Our abilities do not define us who we are as human beings, and our disabilities should not diminish our sense of self. Each person regardless of what he/she is able to do, has the right to live fully and free from stigma.

This project is supported by educational and community organizations. It is also endorsed by many religious and social groups who share its goal of raising awareness regarding the biases and prejudices that exist against people living with a disability and/or their families and/or caregivers. The burden of social and cultural stigma impacts entire families who experience high levels of stress due to perceived and often false notions regarding disability. The caregivers in such families face a dual challenge of first caring and protecting the person with disability, and at the same time needing to take measures to shield themselves from being overwhelmed by socially accepted stereotyping. As the data from the interviews suggest, managing stress both inside the home and outside in society can often become unbearable for many families, especially caregivers.

On the social and economic front, these families need support and encouragement. They need to be empowered by having access to educational and health care as well as financial resources, which will help them manage their lives better. At the same time, resources should be allocated to offer educational opportunities in the community to allow non-disabled people to learn about disability and its impact upon families in order to change the public opinion and to remove the stigma.

On the cultural and religious side of things, it is important to recognize that the Islamic tradition offers a way to combat the beliefs and actions that deprive anyone of their dignity regardless of abilities, rank, or status. It is a religious mandate to regard every person as equal in the eyes of God, who is endowed with the same rights and obligations as the next person. It follows that every person should have access to the resources that cater to their basic human rights, including right to education, to make a living, and to live in peace and security, among others. These rights also entail every person should be able to live a life without harassment and shame.

Accessibility is a religious issue in Islam. Every person has equal access to the divine through prayer and personal reflection. Every person has access to the holy Qur'an, believed to be the word of God. If everyone has direct access to their Creator, why should any individual be denied access to her/his fundamental rights on earth? These rights include equal access to opportunities as well as places that are available and open to others. Thus, it is integral for a community of faith to ensure that public places are accessible in every way, including mosques and other social institutions. In a justice-oriented polity (and society), regardless of whether it invokes religious or secular authority to manage its affairs, public services and their delivery methods should be equally accessible to people with all abilities.



The religious arguments are often aligned with human rights arguments regarding how to be inclusive, compassionate, and to treat individuals with disability as equals. From a religious standpoint, it is vital that we strive to remove stigmas, biases, and discrimination in society against people with disabilities, and recognize their right to dignity as well as those who care for them, especially mothers and other women relatives who bear the significant part of this responsibility. It is also important to be sincere yet not be condescending by calling people with disabilities as “special.”

The work of the Disabilities project does not only belong to the social, cultural, and humanitarian spheres, it is also a spiritual and religious issue. The interview data you see here have shown that disparity exists and is often hidden in plain sight. Anyone who is concerned with faith must be alarmed at the findings of this data. Every person of faith is called to listen to the voices represented here and act to make things right.