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# Disability as an Inspiration: Rich Experiences of Women with Disabilities in the UAE

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**Abstract:** The goal of this article was to have Emirati women with disabilities speak out to share their experiences and successes in struggling with disabilities. Fifteen Emirati women with disabilities were selected from a snowball sample to be interviewed. The resulting data is qualitative. The study revealed several important factors that facilitated the full participation of these Emirati women in domestic and professional life. The study and its findings will help society (its structures, institutions, and the individuals working within them) to better address the needs of Emirati women with disabilities. The researchers of this study are not aware of any previous study that highlights the struggles and successes of Emirati women with disabilities in the fullness of their shared narratives.

**Keywords:** Women with disabilities; social inclusion; empowerment; inspiration; UAE.

## 1 Introduction

More than one billion people in the world are considered to have some form of disability. In the female population aged 18 and older, the average prevalence rate is 19.2%, or nearly 1 in 5, compared to 12% in the male population (UN Women, 2018) [1]. The UN Women's Strategy: Empowering Women and Girls with Disabilities - Towards Full and Effective Participation and Gender Equality was developed to ensure a more systematic approach to strengthening the inclusion of the rights of women with disabilities in UN Women's efforts to achieve gender equality, empower all women and girls, and realise their rights (UN Women, 2018) [1].

In the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates is a pioneer in gender equality. According to the World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Gap report, the UAE has achieved the highest level of gender equality in the Arab world, demonstrating a national commitment to women's empowerment in both the public and private sectors [2]. In addition, the UAE is a regional leader in promoting women's access to quality healthcare and higher educational opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2020) [2]. According to Peace and Security's 2021 WPS Index, the UAE ranks first in the MENA region and 24th globally in women's inclusion, equity,

and security (UAE Embassy in Washington DC, 2022) [3]. The main purpose of this paper is to present the rich experiences and achievements of Emirati women with disabilities in their own words.

The societal traditions, cultural norms and expectations, legislation and its processes affect the inspiration and empowerment of women in general [4] (Al Gharaibeh, 2009). Kosciulek and Merz defined empowerment as a combination of internal-psychological elements (e.g., sense of control, competence, responsibility, commitment, and future orientation) and situational-social elements (e.g., control over resources, interpersonal skills, work, organisational skills, social skills) that lead to better community integration, empowerment, and quality of life for people with disabilities [5,6]. As a result, social workers can focus on the needs of women, the elderly, the very young, and people with disabilities and help promote civic and legal order, social justice, and humanity [7].

## 2 Women with disabilities in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates has introduced a national strategy for the empowerment of Emirati women for the

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period 2015-2021. The strategy provides the general framework and guidelines for all plans and programmes aimed at empowering women and enabling them to lead independent lives and participate fully in sustainable development programmes. It also aims to empower Emirati women to become successful leaders in the UAE, the region and the world. In formulating the objectives of this ambitious strategy, the initiators referred to several important official documents, including the UAE Constitution, the Federal Government's Vision 2021, local government strategies, the Emirati Citizens' Code of Conduct and Values, the Beyond 2015 Development Plan, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, other relevant international conventions, the Arab Women's Development Strategy, and the International Competitiveness Indicators (National Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women for the Period 2015-2021) [8]. This official framework strengthens the capacity of social workers to serve people, which requires adopting a legal frame of reference and challenging sociocultural norms [9].

The UAE's approach to serving women with disabilities is in line with UN Women's 2018-2021 Strategic Plan, the commitments in the joint chapter of the UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women Strategic Plans, and extends UN Women's efforts in the area of empowering people with disabilities.

### 3 Literature review and theoretical framework

This part presents the literature review and explains how the UAE policy for people with disabilities has moved from a medical model to a social model that empowers women with disabilities and is based on many pillars, as shown in fig. 1. I used the model of the Ministry of Community Development with some modifications [10].

Al Zboon and Smadi (2015) conducted a study to assess the level of self-determination of Jordanian women with impairments. The study involved 141 women with intellectual, hearing, visual, and physical disabilities. They were selected from seven major vocational rehabilitation facilities in Jordan. Based on Wehmeyer's previous work, a 60-item scale was created and divided into four domains: psychological empowerment, autonomy, self-regulation, and self-actualization. An average level of self-determination was found in all four domains [11].

Also, Al-Attayah and Hassanein (2017) discussed human rights, difficulties, and measures to strengthen self-determination for Qatari women with disabilities. The results of the questionnaire showed that civil and political rights were not the main concern for women with disabilities, but rather social barriers, legislative and political empowerment [12]. Consistent with Rimmer and

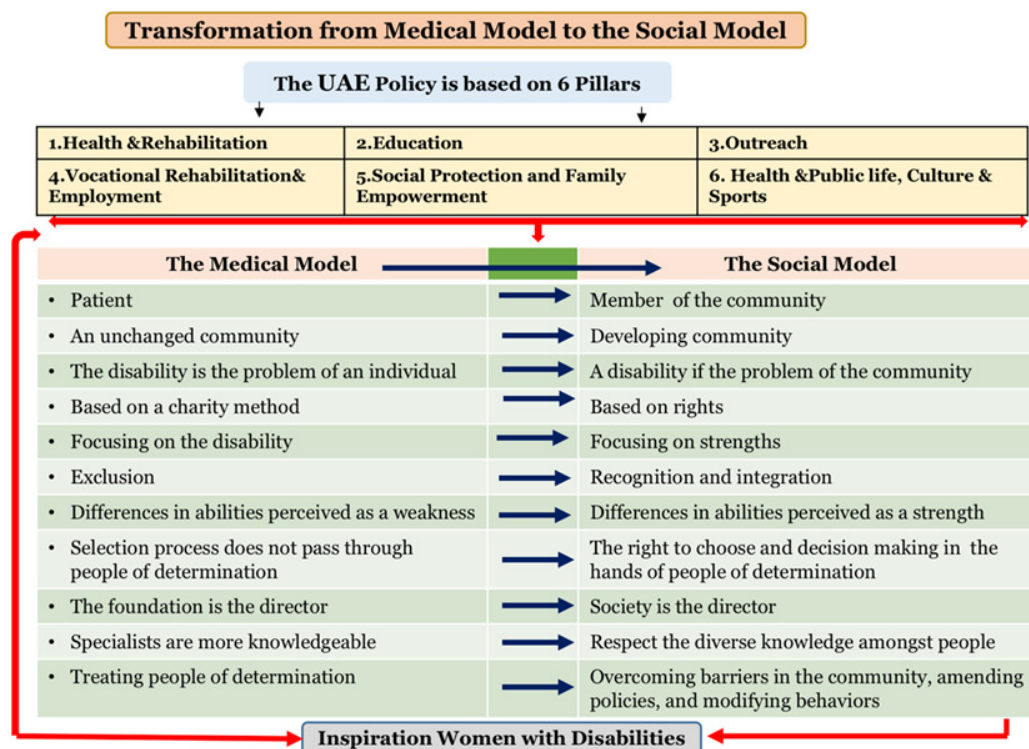
Rowland (2008), health professionals needed to recognize the significant health disparities that exist between people with and without disabilities. This required greater attention to creating a disability-friendly environment to reduce architectural, programmatic, and attitudinal barriers to participation in self-initiated health promotion activities. To empower people with disabilities, community service providers should fully support increased access to all health promotion venues, programs, and services [13].

Collins and Valentine (2003) focused on women with disabilities in his study. Women with disabilities had unique characteristics, abilities, and challenges that were highlighted. A feminist perspective was used to identify and evaluate the implications for developing legislation, providing services to, and working with women with disabilities. Rather than focusing on a typical paradigm where the "problem" centers on an individual woman with a disability, disability was examined in the context of society [14].

According to Emmett and Alant (2006), women faced greater barriers to access and participation than men. Mothers and caregivers faced particular challenges in raising children with disabilities or chronic illnesses, especially in the context of female-headed households and early pregnancy. Alant and Emmett (2006) emphasized the need to view disability as an essential component of growth rather than a separate need competing with other causes and expressions of poverty [15].

The aim of Al Rub and Al Ahmed (2014) study was to uncover the problems faced by disabled women in Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire designed by the researchers was given to (297) disabled women and girls and (297) non-disabled women and girls to investigate the difficulties faced by disabled women and non-disabled women. The results of the study showed statistically significant differences in the difficulties of disabled women across all factors. The results also showed statistically significant differences between the difficulties of disabled and non-disabled women [16].

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), there are increasing campaigns and organizations that raise awareness of a wide range of disabilities and provide the necessary support and facilities. However, the importance of cultural and social circumstances in the integration or non-integration of disabled people into UAE society needs further research [17]. The shift from the medical model to the social model that disability programs and policies in the UAE have made has contributed to the integration of women with disabilities into society and to the various activities that have inspired them to work, educate themselves, and adapt to disability, as shown in fig. 1 [10].



**Fig. 1:** The Ministry of Community Development (UAE) in the transition from the medical to the social model.

## 4 Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was used for the study. The researcher interviewed 15 Emirati women with disabilities who were selected through a snowball system in 2021. Participants were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time. They were also informed that their personal information would be treated with utmost confidentiality. Prior to the interview, participants provided verbal consent (via voice call; a video call was not used out of respect for participant privacy and confidentiality). Interviews were conducted in Arabic and professionally translated into English.

After preliminary analysis of the data, participants' responses were categorized into themes related to their experiences in many aspects, as explained in the next section.

## 5 Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results of the study focusing on the areas of inspiration of women with disabilities in education, employment, projects and special initiatives, hobbies, writing, health care, and volunteering, and how these experiences have influenced their lives.

### 5.1 Education

From the participants' responses, it appeared that they could be divided into two groups: those who had no difficulty completing their undergraduate and graduate education and those who did. It was evident that the first group of participants viewed education as an important means to a better life. They also benefited from the government's material and legal support for people with disabilities in the form of laws, regulations, free educational materials, and free transportation.

"I was able to complete my studies because I received support in the form of free books, teaching materials, and transportation. When I studied at UAE College, I was transported between the dormitory and classes in a small car specially designed for people with disabilities." Case (1)

"I received my education in government schools. Thanks to the rehabilitation programs and other facilities provided to me, such as special places for my wheelchair in school or transportation, I was able to overcome all challenges" Case (12) Some participants reported that they received great support from their family, friends, and other women with disabilities to continue their education. "My mother helped me to overcome my disability and complete my secondary education and even enroll in college." Case (2)

"I am also very grateful to Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services and its President, Her Highness Sheikha Jameela bint Mohammad Al Qasimi, for their support" Case (2). "I have been mobility impaired since I was three years old and my friends taught me reading and arithmetic at home. They also lent me books from their school library so I enjoyed reading. Later, I attended classes and courses with them. Later, I decided to attend an adult education center. There I took a placement test and was placed in grade 6. Now I have graduated from secondary school." Case (5)

Several women with disabilities wanted to achieve more by pursuing a college degree or studying abroad.

"I have a degree in environmental and health protection" Case (11).

"I have completed my college education and am now doing a MA" Case (12).

"I received great support to complete my secondary education and recently managed to secure a scholarship to study English in the US" Case (13).

However, some of the participants faced numerous challenges in their pursuit of education. Some of these challenges were related to the nature of their disability, some to where they lived, and some to the attitudes of their teachers. Although Case 8 graduated from UAEU with a degree in history, she did not hesitate to share some of the many difficulties she faced during her school years. Case 8 is 42 years old, but she clearly remembers how some of her school teachers seemed unaware of her visual impairment and how those teachers who knew her case seemed unable to address her needs. To make matters worse, she grew up in a remote area where there was no access to special schools or universities.

People with disabilities do have access to other educational pathways, such as adult education, but these often do not qualify them to enter college:

"I could not continue attending regular state schools because the courses were too difficult for me. Later, I managed to participate in an adult education program, but only up to a certain level" Case (14).

In addition, those who cannot participate in integration programs can attend training centers for people with disabilities, as Case (15) did when she finished her secondary school. This helped her to later enroll in a college program.

Case (4) was particularly proud of her achievements, especially completing a postgraduate degree in family counseling, a program.

## 5.2 Employment, special projects and initiatives

Although the UAE's laws and regulations reflect the country's desire to provide equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities, the public sector remains their primary employer. Of the fifteen participants in this study, 12 are employed, one of whom owns his own business and only 1 is employed in the

private sector. The remaining three are unemployed due to the nature of their disability or lack of appropriate skills.

"When I graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology, I was offered a job in a school library. This did not match my expectations, so I decided to start my own business." Case (1) "I am an employee of Dubai Customs, a member of the Dubai Club for People with Disabilities, and a champion in athletics." Case (2)

"Praise be to Allah, I have managed to rise from a call center employee to a customs officer. I also received the Service Star, Innovative Disability Challengers Award, Distinguished Employee Award, and the Distinguished Award from the Director-General of Dubai Customs." Case (3)

"I work at the Ministry of Health". Case (4)

"... A few months after I graduated, I was hired by Dubai Media Institution. I love my job there and get so much support from everyone there". Case (5)

"I chose the Rehabilitation and Training Center because I have always liked arts and crafts. I have received so much support there, even though I did not like the place at first. I opened a workshop there and I can make candles in all kinds of shapes. Many of my candles are sold to other institutions and in exhibitions." Case (14).

Those who are unemployed due to the nature of their disability or lack of suitable skills have started special projects and initiatives.

"... After five years, I decided to stop working and devote all my time to my family. Now I am back working in the same company after receiving extensive training. As for my projects, I am an activist for people with disabilities, especially for psychological and social issues. I also have my own website." Case (1)

"I have participated in several computer courses in different emirates in facilities that do not cater to people with disabilities, and have completed them all with flying colors. The last course I took in Dubai qualified me to teach a course at Al Ain College along with a visually impaired friend of mine. This made the college care more about people with disabilities." Case (6).

## 5.3 Hobbies and writing

Most of the participants play sports, paint, take pictures, and write.

"My writing is about social phenomena. Ashwak was a collection of short stories published by Dar Ketab in 2014, and now I am working on a book about addiction and several stories about [drug] addicts." Case (1)

"As an activist working on the issues of people with disabilities, I write about these things and try to make people aware of these issues on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter." Case (1) "I have received so much mental and health support from my family and Althiqa Club. I have also found support through my participation in Art for All Theater activities, whether it be poetry, drama, or art" Case (2).

“I am a member of the Photography Club, Basmat Dho’a, Iqraa Library, and the Library Board” Case (5).

“I won the chess competition in Dubai”. Case (6)

“Praise be to Allah, I had the opportunity for education and I can also write well. I also write poetry. All this has helped me build my own identity and become more courageous in dealing with my disability. I consider myself a role model for other people with disabilities.” Case (13).

#### 5.4 Healthcare

All participants reported that they are in stable condition and in good health. They all enjoy free health care and are eligible for government-funded treatment abroad if the required treatment was not available in the UAE.

“Currently, I do not need any medical care except routine checks on my medication. The government provides all necessary medical services.” Case (11)

“I would like to have an electronic wheelchair because it is more comfortable than the regular wheelchairs”. Case (12)

“I received all the medical care and rehabilitation I needed in the UAE and was sent abroad for further treatment and surgery.” Case (13)

“I receive all the medical care I need, i.e. regular prescriptions and examinations”. Case (14).

#### 5.5 Voluntary Work

Volunteering promotes the integration and inclusion of women with disabilities in all aspects of social, economic, and cultural life.

It is also a way to raise awareness about the rights of women with disabilities. Seven of the participants volunteered in various capacities and shared their experiences with the researcher:

“I have volunteered in many charity and social initiatives, which has taught me altruism and increased my self-confidence. I hope to become a more active member of society and serve the people and my country.” Case (3)

“I volunteered at the Sharjah Association for the Parents of Disabled People and served on the parents’ council of the Sharjah City for Humanitarian Services where my son studies. I also participated in many conferences, forums and events on people with disabilities in the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. Praise Allah, my son’s disability has been the reason for me to meet and know so many new people”. Case (4)

“I used to advise the public on how to deal with children with disabilities and how they also have feelings. We also used to visit schools and meet mothers who have just been informed that their children may suffer a disability and support them. This used to give me so much hope for the future”. Case (4)

“... opportunities for training, independence, love of volunteering and working in teams... I registered to volunteer in Expo 2020 and hope to leave my mark on that event”. Case (6)

“I also used to work in Khor Fakkan city Club and volunteer in many places. I’m also a weightlifter and like French bowling but this’s not available here right now”. Case (10)

## 6 conclusion

In some cities, infrastructure and services for women with disabilities need to be improved to meet their demands as mentioned in the United Arab Emirates’ National Report (2019) [18]. There are a number of important factors that enable Emirati women with disabilities to normally participate in their family and work lives. A significant factor is an official and social will to empower women with disabilities. Other important factors include social awareness, the availability of support services, legislative support, and practical strategies that all enable women with disabilities to pursue their hopes, dreams, and interests while engaging fully in their societies. The UAE national policy with 6 pillars (Health and Rehabilitation, Education, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Outreach, Social Protection, and Family Empowerment, Public Life, and finally Culture and Sports) enabled the Emirati women with disability to move from inspiration to empowering level. There have been many inspiring stories whether in education, sports, literature, or volunteers from the UAE that have encouraged other women with disabilities both at home, in the Middle East, and internationally.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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