

WHO Promotes Disability Rights for Palestinians



The social barriers – discrimination – that persons with disability face daily affect their quality of life often more than the impairment itself. An inclusive attitude from others, as well as physical aids, such as elevators and ramps, hearing and vision assistance, are necessary for persons with disability to have equal access to facilities, information, and opportunities. Anyone can become disabled: before or during birth, through disease, accidents, or simply as a result of aging.

Palestinians with disabilities face many barriers in exercising their rights, including physical, legal, institutional, and informational barriers. The Palestinian Authority (PA) demonstrated its commitment to addressing disability issues and reducing barriers experienced by persons with disabilities (PWD) by becoming the 144th State Party to ratify the Convention on Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) on April 2, 2014. This United Nations convention obliges states to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all PWD and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

About 300,000 Palestinians, or 7 percent of the population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are living with a disability, according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS). The last national survey, published in 2011, provided an incomplete but alarming snapshot of discrimination, highlighting both social and physical barriers: 87.3 percent of all persons with disability were unemployed; 8.7 percent aged 18 years and above avoid engaging in any activities because of poor public attitudes; 76.4 percent



aged 18 years and above do not use public transportation due to the lack of infrastructure adaptations, and 22.2 percent of disabled individuals were forced to drop out of school because they had no means to physically access the school.*

Several development NGOs and human rights organizations link the deterioration of the rights of PWD in Palestine to overall violations against Palestinian rights by Israel, the economic crisis, and weak legal frameworks. The Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR) acknowledges discrimination against PWD within Palestinian society and their lack of access to public facilities: governmental facilities contribute to further marginalization of PWD, affecting and limiting their equal access to health care, education, and employment opportunities. Although many people with disability become accustomed to the frustrations of inaccessibility, governments and societies still have a

responsibility to do their best to make life easier for PWD. Individuals and organizations need to be proactive in including PWD in educational facilities, the job market, and social activities, and should ensure that services can be accessed by those with a visual, hearing, mobility, or mental disability. PWD are a highly vulnerable group, especially in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), and strengthening their role in the community will achieve a healthier equal environment for everyone.

To alleviate the situation of PWD in Palestine, the World Health Organization (WHO) in partnership with five other UN agencies launched a program in 2013 that aimed to raise awareness and respect for disability rights in the education, health, employment, and social sectors in the oPt and to mainstream disability rights in governmental and UN agencies. The UN-CRPD specifies that a strong international cooperation system in support of national efforts needs to be put in place in order to move the disability-rights agenda forward. The program created a partnership between government ministries, UN agencies, international donors, disabled persons organizations (DPOs), and other key stakeholders. UNSCO supervised the overall coordination, and each agency managed and reported on their activities, working closely with ministries and other partner organizations.

Many persons with disabilities in Palestine do not receive the disability-related services that they require and thus experience exclusion from everyday-life activities.



WHO promotes the integration of people with disabilities in society. Photo courtesy of WHO / Rula Halawani.

Within the joint UN project, WHO focused on government policy and, in 2015, conducted two introductory disability-mainstreaming workshops for 40 relevant government officials from several ministries and UN staff that led to a review of the legislation, policies, and practices within the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Higher Education, and Ministry of Social Affairs, focusing on the needs and legal rights of people with disabilities in the oPt. The goal was to raise awareness

In 2014 and 2015, WHO promoted the introduction of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), which reflects the interaction between features of a person's body and characteristics of the society in which the person lives, to partner ministries and UN agencies in the West Bank and Gaza.

among staff concerning the CRPD, to reflect rights in all policies, programs, and practices, and to encourage compliance. These workshops assisted partner ministries in understanding disability as a multifactorial and comprehensive issue, emphasizing that disability is a complex social problem beyond health. As a first step, the workshops led to a detailed evaluation of the disability assessment mechanism used in Palestine for eligibility for government services. Subsequently, many government institutions, including the Ministry of Health, adopted new active approaches in order to improve recruitment policies and human resources management for people with disability, with the aim to achieve their right of access to relevant vacancies. For example, job eligibility criteria in the Ministry of Health were amended to be more inclusive and provide access to technically qualified PWD.

Following the West Bank workshop, there was a strong interest in upgrading the narrow disability assessment system in Palestine in order to make it more comprehensive and coherent with respect to the various sectors involved

and to introduce more transparent criteria that target priority needs, including those of girls and women. UN organizations participating in these efforts used a checklist to examine eight areas for mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities: policy level, human resources management, planning, monitoring and evaluation, programming level, advocacy, accessibility, and capacity building. It is hoped that this checklist will help UN agencies monitor their progress toward commitment to disability rights.

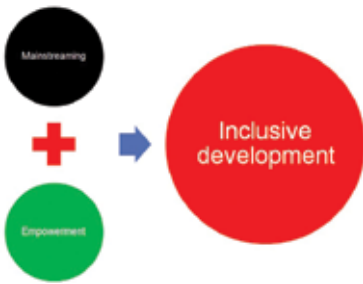
After the program workshop in Gaza, the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) adopted the International Classification

of Functioning (ICF) as a basis for building a comprehensive electronic database for PWD in Gaza, displaced persons organizations, and the services provided by both the governmental and nongovernmental sectors. This e-system was needed to provide accurate data on the situation of PWD. MoSA is now evaluating the system, while the Ministry of Health is updating

Mohannad Al-Shaffi, an employee at Ramallah Municipality, uses the stairway lift in the municipality facility the day it received the access award for people with disability.



Inclusive development



all medical forms to comply with the ICF and integrating them with the e-system.

Completing the process of mainstreaming disability in governmental plans, policies, legislations, and development programs will require a lot of persistence and hard work amongst key stakeholders and policy makers. The joint work that was started by WHO and partner UN agencies and that targeted mainly government agencies and UN agencies constitutes the first milestone towards the inclusion of PWD in governmental

agencies and national plans. Additional work needs to be done, however, to ensure a more comprehensive inclusion of persons with disabilities into development plans and future strategic frameworks. To this end, the joint UN group hopes to embark on a new phase in the coming years that will aim to promote and advocate full disability mainstreaming amongst all development partners, donors, and the UN, while at the same time following up and continuing the ongoing work with government and UN agencies. Remaining gaps need to be identified and addressed, more assessment needs to be carried out, and follow-up must continue to include advocacy for the mainstreaming of disability in all aspects of life and society.

The WHO office in the occupied Palestinian territory is the principal technical adviser to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, providing advice and support to strengthen health services, address public health issues, and promote research for health. WHO is also the UN lead agency of the humanitarian Health and Nutrition Cluster, coordinating in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health the assistance provided by international and local partners to the health sector. WHO employs approximately 45 staff at its offices in the West Bank and Gaza, including international and local professionals with expertise in medicine, public health, nursing, and other specializations. As the lead health agency, WHO works with many partners, including UN agencies, donors, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and the private sector to support the Palestinian Authority to reach its national health-development goals and to ensure the effective coordination efforts of these organizations.

Article photos courtesy of WHO.



WHO experts Ola Abu Alghaib and Pascal Granier have conducted many mainstreaming training workshops.

* Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2011), Survey of Persons with Disabilities, Ramallah, Palestine.