

Physical Disability, Gender, and Marriage in Jordanian Society
Salam Jalal, EDD &
Susan Gabel, PhD
Chapman University, USA

Abstract: In this article, three physically disabled Jordanian men discuss their perspectives on gender, marriage, family, and disability in Jordanian society. Their words reveal the contradictions with which they live. They refuse to marry disabled women even while they recognize their own stigmatization and oppression. They long for “real women” while absolving themselves of any guilt in the oppression of disabled women. They want wives who can provide the physical assistance they need while facing significant barriers to fulfilling their role as husband, father, and provider.

Keywords: disability, gender, marriage

I had thought of sexual love as an honor that was too great for me—not too great for my understanding and my feeling, but much too great and too beautiful for the body in which I was doomed to live. (Hathaway, 2000, p. 55)

In this article we take a tentative stance toward the social model of disability first articulated by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS, 1975) that argues disability is something imposed upon those with impairments, and that excludes people with impairments from “full participation in society.” As Tom Shakespeare (2010) points out, the social model neglects impairment’s influence on people’s lives and is unable to tease apart the impact of impairment versus the impact of social barriers. This second problem with the social model, that it ignores impairment, becomes fully evident in our data in which we explore what disabled men who have physical impairments have to say about marriage partners. Throughout, we use the term “physical disability” to refer to disabled people who have physical impairments of some type. “Disability” is used in the social model sense, as an oppressed social status, unless it is in a direct quote from participants. In that case, participants sometimes seem to be referring to impairment while other times their concept of disability remains unclear or seems aligned with the social model. We leave you to interpret their meaning in these situations.

According to Zingale, (1984) disabled persons are still “seldom seen as normal human beings with a right to intimacy in personal relationships and to other things the able bodied take for granted” (p.1). Rubin, & Roessler (2008) and others (Finkelstein, 1993; Oliver, 1990; Swain, Barnes, & Thomas, 2004) report that from ancient times to now, disabled people have been stereotyped and stigmatized as asexual. Often, persons with physical impairments are among the most stigmatized because of their visibility (Falk, 2001; Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001) and disabled women are more discriminated against than men. Disabled women are more often deprived of equal education and equal employment opportunities and they are less likely to marry (Abu-Habib, 1997; Britt, 1988; Emmett & Alant, 2006; Fairchild, 2000; Ghai, 2003). Being a woman and being disabled layers stigma over stigma.

In this article we report the results of a study that has sought to answer two questions that emerge from the lived experience of the first author, a physically disabled Jordanian man married to a non-disabled woman: (1) why do some physically disabled males refuse to marry disabled females? and (2) why do they want to marry non-disabled females? Since the answers to these questions are embedded culturally, we first provide a brief overview of disability, gender, and marriage in Jordanian society. Next, we touch on what the literature has to say about visibility and stigma. Then we present the study and the interview data. Finally, we consider the interviews in light of internalized oppression and the materiality of disablement.

Disability and Gender in Developing, Middle East, and Arab Countries

While Islam is the majority religion in Arab countries, Jewish, Christian, and other religious groups also populate this region. Uhlmann (2005) observes that "Islam is ubiquitous in the Middle East...inflecting all aspects of life of Muslims and non-Muslims alike," creating a cultural milieu in which it is difficult to tease apart Muslim traditions and values from those of other religions. Given this reality, we culturally approach disability and gender in the Middle East and Arab countries.

Studies across the world reflect the tremendous oppression and hierarchy between disabled men and women based on gender. Being disabled and female in many societies creates "stigma upon stigma" (Britt, 1988). Chenoweth (1993) calls this a "double strike" (p.26). Fairchild (2002) states that "women with disabilities are often at a larger disadvantage due to a double discrimination, based on their gender and disability status"(p. 14). Saxton & Howe (1987) write, "There are many parallels between the oppression of women and of disabled people. Both groups are seen by others as passive, dependent, and childlike; their skills are minimized and their contributions to society undervalued" (p. xii). Hanna and Rogovsky (1991) surmise that people generally attribute physical impairment in men to peripheral factors such as war, injuries, or car accidents, while it is often believed to be inherited with women.

As reported by the United Nations: "Women in every society in the world remain economically, politically and culturally disadvantaged in relation to men" (Bryson, 2004). According to Abu-Habib (1997), disabled women in the Middle East seldom participate in making decisions about their lives. Even domestic policies and national and international agencies neglect disabled women in their agendas. Historically, neither the women's movement nor the disability movement in the Middle East includes disabled women to a significant extent (Abu-Habib, 1997). The fundamental beliefs about women in Arab countries are that they are housekeepers, wives, and mothers. While both disabled men and women are marginalized, prejudged, and discriminated against in Jordan, disabled women are more vulnerable to abuse and more stigmatized than disabled men.

Arabic society is patriarchal, even in light of modernization (Uhlmann, 2005; Moghadam, 2004). Turmusani (2001) argues that disabled women in Islamic countries in the Middle East are devalued and given the lowest status. They face more challenges than do disabled men, often have no access to employment, and are kept hidden away. Impairment is synonymous with disability and is considered a stigma that causes shame that might extend to the entire family. Disabled women seldom marry because it is believed that they are not able to be mothers and

housewives. Disabled women are twice as likely to be divorced. Studies in other developing countries have found similar results (Abu-Habib, 1997; Addlakha, 2007; Braathen & Kvam, 2008; Cheausuwantavee, 2002; Dalal, 2006; Dhungana, 2006; Ghai, 2003; Gray, 1999; Kiani, 2009).

In *Gender and Disability: Women's Experience in the Middle East*, Abu-Habib (1997) reports a case in Lebanon where two men disagreed about marrying disabled women. One of the interviewees believes that disabled women are not able to take on their household responsibilities. He rejects the notion of marrying a disabled woman, even if she could manage her responsibilities, such as carrying children. Another interviewee points out that even though he encourages marriage between disabled men and women and advocates for them, he believes disabled women are not fit for marriage, unlike disabled men.

A further example from Abu-Habib shows the inequality between men and women based on gender in Lebanon. Zeinab is not educated and she works in a sewing factory to earn money. Her brother wasted his own money and now Zeinab is responsible for the entire family and she is not allowed to get married because they need her money. Another Lebanese example is of two blind siblings: the father sent the boy to school while the girl remained at home. The girl, who now is a 29 year-old woman, said, "I shall never forgive him [her father] for this" (p. 46). Thomas and Lakkis (2003) describe the impact of gender differences on access to education and employment in Lebanon where disabled students are still attending institutions. The researchers interviewed 200 disabled graduates between 14 and 40 years of age in order to know to what extent the institutions assist students in education and employment. They found that even though disabled women academically achieve better, perform higher, their rate of employment is 35%, compared to 52% for disabled men.

Marriage Decisions in Jordanian Society

Jordanian society is patriarchal; therefore males dominate over females. According to El-Islam (1983), the hierarchical system in an Arab family is "male over female and older over younger" (p. 321). The Jordanian family is a social institution consisting of parents, brothers, sisters, and sisters- and brothers -in- law. Sometimes it is extended to include uncles, aunts, and cousins. Most of them live together in the same house, especially parents, children, and daughters-in-law. Even if they do not live together, the bond among the family members is very strong. Barakat (1993) described the Arab family relationship:

"The family is at the center of all social organization in all three Arab patterns of living (Bedouin, rural, and urban) and patriarchal among tribes, peasants, and the urban poor. The family constitutes the dominant social institution through which individuals and groups inherit their religious, class, and cultural affiliations (p.98)."

Proposing marriage in Jordan is done in what is considered the traditional way and the authority of the family is critical in the decision to propose marriage or accept a marriage proposal. Male relatives, in particular, have significant influence over decisions about the women in the family (Moghadam, 2005). Turmusani (1999) reports that "the position of women in Jordan has improved in comparison to other Islamic countries, but is still different than that of

men. For instance, women are not allowed freedom in choosing a husband” (p.109), Abudabbeh (1996) shows that a woman's decision in marriage is subject to her family’s approval. Women are restricted from making important decisions related to their individual lives.

The values of the Jordanian society and those of Islam prohibit men and women from having intimate relationships outside of marriage. Such a relationship is considered taboo, shameful, and a terrible mistake. In order to get married, an older woman, usually the mother of the man, starts looking for a bride who meets her son’s requirements and desires for a spouse. Both the man and the woman in question have a right to accept or reject each other but if the woman shows acceptance, the crucial decision is made by her family.

Visibility, Stigma, and Internalized Oppression

The meaning of disability “differs from one country to another or from one culture to another” (Rispler-Chaim, 2007). In Jordan, the term disability generally does not describe all disabled persons. On the contrary, it is more likely used to describe visible physical impairment. Visibility is an important criterion for what constitutes disability in Jordan. Jones et al (1984) point out that people with visible differences, such as physical impairments, are the objects of stigmatization because they are visible in both homogeneous and heterogeneous societies. They are a vivid example of the difference between the categories of “abnormal” and “normal.” Goffman (1963) asserts that visual disability causes “discredited identity” (p. 4). Crocker et al. (1998) focus on the idea that with visibility, “stigma can provide the primary schema through which everything ... is understood by others”(p.507).

Ainlay, Coleman, and Becker (1986) suggest that visibility and stigma have a more disabling impact in cohesive societies like Jordan. The values and perceptions of homogeneous societies do not adjust to change and difference as readily as do heterogeneous societies. Solidarity among people, especially in the tribal affiliation system of Jordan, prevents any external factors from changing the perceptual beliefs about any phenomena. Therefore, any attempt to resist stigma may be meaningless, and stigma will remain with the stigmatized.

Ladieu-Leviton, Adler, and Dembo (1977) suggest that as a result of the impact of stigma on people, stigmatized individuals may agree with how society depicts them. Further, they may start to devalue and isolate themselves. If they admit that they have a stigma; they may not even try to reject or resist the vast majority of perceptions. This depiction has been identified as the “halo” phenomenon which means, “A spread of evaluation from characteristics actually affected by the injury, to other characteristics not necessarily so affected” (Ladieu-Leviton, et al., 1977). A common way the stigmatized person reacts is to practice stigma towards others. Not only is the stigma received, but also, the possessor contributes to stigmatization of others.

While physical impairment can be highly visible, some studies indicate that intellectual disability and mental illness also are stigmatized. In a study in Jordan, Gharibeh (2009) demonstrates that, “intellectual disabilities, mental retardation, or mental illness are more stigmatizing than physical disability, while blind persons or persons with visual impairments are less stigmatized” (p.71). Gharibeh attributes stigmatization to a tribal tradition: “A tribe’s honor,

and social standing [depend] on certain qualities that are thought to be passed on from generation to generation”(p. 71).

Stigma can contribute to the development of internalized oppression. Lipsky (1987) defines internalized oppression as “the turning upon ourselves, upon our families, and upon our own people the distress patterns that result from the racism and oppression of the majority society” (1987). Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, and Schrock (2000) explain internalized oppression as “defensive othering among [the] subordinated” (p. 425), a process that involves the denial of the stigmatized self, acceptance of the normative standard, and abandonment of one’s identity. “The process, in each case,” write Schwalbe, et al.:

“...Involves accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, “There are indeed others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me (ibid.).”

Rather than “blaming the victim,” Masson (1990) points out that “internalized oppression is not the cause of [disabled people’s] mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which [disabled people] exist” (Marks, 1999). As do the participants of this study, disabled people,

“...Harbor inside [them]selves the pain and the memories, the fears and the confusions, the negative self-images and the low expectations, turning them into weapons with which to re-injure ourselves, every day of our lives(ibid.).”

The Study

This study took place from December 1, 2011 through March, 2012. Three participants were interviewed. To be included in this study the participants, met four criteria: (1) visibly physically disabled, (2) unmarried or married to a non-disabled woman, (3) financially independent of the family, and (4) unwilling to marry a disabled woman. The first author, a married, physically impaired Jordanian man living temporarily in the United States, conducted the interviews. He also did not want to marry a disabled woman and thinks of this as a paradox. Interviews were audio taped and then translated into English by a translator with fluency in both Arabic and English. Each participant was interviewed four times, and each interview lasted about forty minutes to an hour.

Participants were interviewed via Skype (Version 5.5) software, a free online application that enables the user to make voice and video calls. This was necessary due to the fact that the first author could not travel to Jordan. Interviewing people through the internet has been used in qualitative and mixed method research (Brownlow & O’Dell, 2002; Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2004; Meho, 2006; Olivero & Lunt, 2004). Brownlow and O’Dell describe the benefit of the on-line interview as “inexpensive, convenient and attractive to people who do not like face-to-face interviews.”

Interviews were semi-structured and began with open ended questions about participants’ marriage preferences, decisions, and experiences. Each subsequent interview consisted of

follow-up questions seeking clarification or elaboration of previous responses and further probing for responses that could provide answers to the research questions.

The Participants

Jordan is a small country where it is easy to determine a person's identity if specific information is provided. Participants have concerns about confidentiality. Therefore, we have been careful to provide only basic information about the participants. Born in 1976, Adam is single and lives with his family. He had polio as a child and now has post-polio syndrome. He uses leg braces and crutches to be able to walk. He has a master's degree in special education and intends to pursue his doctorate in the near future. He is an educational administrator in his community.

The second participant, Sami, is 34 years old and has post-polio syndrome. He uses a crutch to walk but does not need any other mobility devices. He was born in a rural community in Jordan where there were no medical or rehabilitation centers to treat him when he contracted polio so he was transported to Amman, the capital city, where he attended school and lived in a residential facility while he recovered. Sami is single and working in Amman where he holds several jobs as a handyman. He lives alone. Although he did not complete high school he earned a degree in electronic maintenance.

The third participant, Jamal, also is 34 years old. He has post-polio syndrome and is living in Amman with his wife and two children. He works as a prosthetic and orthotic technician.

Understanding the Culture Through A Person Who Is Rejected Many Times

The situation of disabled people in Jordanian culture is a significant focus of the participants' responses. They reported that the Jordanian culture portrays them as shameful, defective, dependent, abnormal, and stigmatized. Similarly, they reported that people stereotype them due to lack of awareness about the meaning of disability and disabled people's lives. The first participant, Adam, complained about the way the culture stigmatizes him:

“Jordanian culture has wrong beliefs about the life of disabled persons and disability. People think that people with disabilities are abnormal persons. Our society still thinks that the disabled person is unable to do life's duty. It also believes that we have a limited potential with no talents.”

The second participant, Sami, agrees about society's lack of awareness about disabled people who are marginalized and prevented from moving freely in marriage and in work:

“A disability in Jordan is not as good as in America or in Japan. There is still a lack of awareness about disability and disabled people. We are still ... marginalized. We do not have equal rights with others.”

The third participant, Jamal, has been rejected in marriage many times, and believes that culture and people's attitudes are confusing and contradictory:

“On one hand, I see some disabled that are fully integrated, married, have jobs, and [are] educated. We have rights, duties, and privileges. On the other hand, disabled people seem to have less attention and consideration compared to non-disabled people. I see us deprived from many basic rights, such as the right of free mobility, the use of public facilities, and [it’s] hard to marry.”

Each participant’s answers to questions depends on his unique situation, indicating that while there are some broad generalizations that can be made about Jordanian culture, disabled individuals also must be understood as situated within specific contexts. For example, Jamal’s marriage with his current wife went smoothly though he had been refused so many times:

“You want to understand the culture through a person who is rejected many times; certainly it is something as shit. At the same time I, for instance, had gotten many remarkable privileges and positive attitudes. So, it depends on to whom you are talking.”

We Are a Conservative Society

Marriage is important in Jordanian society and in Arab culture. The family is considered the most basic and important social unit (Moghadam, 2005). Intimate relationships outside marriage are not permitted and sexuality, particularly for females, is carefully controlled, making marriage even more vital for the expression of sexuality (ibid.). Adam says that:

“We are a conservative society and there is no intimacy between males and females away from marriage or outside the law. There are many illegal and illegitimate relationships between males and females, but hidden and no one knows about them. If they had been discovered, the woman's family would have punished her, or even killed her.”

Sami agrees on the importance of marriage. He intends to create a family and have children. Having a wife will allow him to feel emotionally, physically, and psychologically comfortable. He explains:

“I need someone to be with me and talk to her ... to spend days and nights with her. Marriage to me means... means a lot. I want to have many children. I see marriage is also important in terms of an expression of sexual desire. Also, by getting married I will be intellectually and physically comfortable.”

Jamal, who is married, wishes he had been married a long time ago. He has enjoyed his married life and believes his life has meaning now that he is married:

“Marriage is very important... it is important from all aspects, the spiritual, the psychological, and the social aspects. I have just realized the meaning of my life. In Jordan, most often the marriage proposal is conducted in a traditional way. The mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, and in a few cases, a friend of the man search for a woman who meets the man’s requirements.”

As an example, Jamal said:

“My mother found a woman who has my requirements. After my mother told me about her, I went and saw her. I sat with her many times. I could say around four times. We talked and discussed general topics about life and about marriage expectations; I felt comfortable while I was talking to her. Then, we both said to our family, we agreed on marriage.”

In contrast, Adam says he will not get married in the traditional way. He believes traditional marriage shows disrespect to women and considers them as a commodity. In addition, he believes that traditional marriage does not allow partners to understand each other. He reports that:

“We are subject to be rejected more than non-disabled persons because of the customs and traditions which are rooted in the mind of the woman and the parents in general. Society is still depicting us in [the] wrong way. So, disabled people need more time to explain who they are. The nature of my disability imposes me to crawl when I am not wearing the medical device. Such details [like] these are important for the wife to know and to accept it.”

In Jordan, People Feel Ashamed Of Us

Participants all agree that several criteria must be met to find a marriage partner, who must have the correct social standing, education, financial status, and physical appearance. These emphases can present barriers to disabled people since all four criteria are interrelated. For example, if a disabled person cannot obtain an adequate education, he will not have good financial status or social standing. More than any other factor, all three participants attribute disability, as they understand it, as a reason for being refused in a marriage proposal. Jamal expresses it here:

“Marriage is [the] hardest thing whether we have disabilities or not. When disability comes to marriage, it remains a large stumbling block which is very difficult for people to accept.”

Jamal’s proposals of marriage were refused 27 times until he found a wife whose family agreed to let her marry him:

“It is not [a] puzzle. It is obviously because of my disability. Why do you think somebody like me would be rejected? I have a flat, car, career, good income, [am] independent, and I’m good looking. I have all marriage requirements.”

Sami shares this belief, and refers to disability as an “inflexible barrier” to marriage. He says that his rejections “apparently are due to my disability more than a financial matter. There are many who are poor but they are married.” He mentions that money could be found through loans or family but there is no way to get rid of disability.

Marriage approval is controlled first and foremost by the woman's family even if the woman shows acceptance of a proposal. Participants stated that, based on their life experiences, the woman's family dismisses the marriage proposal more often than does the woman. Jamal says:

“Note that that most of the rejection was from the parents. Because when I sat with some women, they were showing a desire to marry me. They accepted me despite my disability. They did not show any reservations. But the parents, and in some cases the brother, oppose the marriage. I am talking from real experience that happened to me.”

Sami elaborates on how the parents make choices on marriage. He talks about what happened to him when a woman indirectly asked her parents about marrying him. The parents rejected him because of his disability. He describes the way in which marriage confers status in Jordanian culture:

“Parents would like to boast of the groom in front of people. The family and woman like to be proud of [the] groom if he is educated, rich, good looking, or a high social class. In Jordan, disability does not bring pride and people feel ashamed of us. Parents may feel ashamed when their daughter's husband is disabled.”

I Am Ready For the Refusal

All participants expect rejection whether or not they have experienced a marriage proposal but they respond differently to the thought of rejection. Sami and Jamal find rejection acceptable and justified. Adam, who does not find it acceptable, says that he would understand that because of his disability he cannot easily find a wife and he could be rejected. Yet, he does not want to be rejected. He values himself and wants to avoid rejection and does not want to be judged by the family. For him, rejection is a very harsh word. However, he says that he would accept a traditional marriage, if:

“I get the green light from the woman and her family before I meet them. I want to be accepted before even they see me... Let me say that if there is rejection, I accept it if it is not because of my disability. Otherwise, I won't go and embarrass myself. I value myself. I don't want to be rejected.”

However, the other two participants say that being rejected due to their disability is justified. Sami says:

“It is normal to be refused. And I expect that. Then I get used to living in oppression and refusal. I am ready for the refusal. I may get a little bit upset if the woman and I were to love each other. I would feel sad and it would be an injustice, but I have nothing to do, it is my fate and it is the life. All disabled people are oppressed and they must endure their fate.”

Jamal has the same reaction:

“Frankly, I have not [been] bothered much because I expected it. I adjusted myself to this rejection. There was not any problem to me. I was aware that as [a] disabled person, it will not be an easy decision. And I justify people’s rejection to me in [the] matter of marriage.”

The participants reflect on suffering, pain, and anxiety when they talk about marriage. They say it feels unfair that it so difficult for them to find a wife. Adam says:

“I lie [to] you or [to] myself if I say it is a normal feeling; absolutely not. I get very anxious when this topic comes to my mind because of rejection. Rejection is not easy. I don’t want to hear the rejection word. I cannot imagine myself rejected even though I know I will face difficulties because of my disability.”

Sami feels anxious and worried because, as he says:

“My disability makes me feel insomnia and anxious when I think of marriage. I don’t know what to do and who will accept me. It is hard to find one to accept me when I am poor and have disability. A disabled person in our society is not desirable as much as normal people.”

On the other hand, Jamal says that he felt anxious and worried after several marriage proposals were rejected but eventually he adjusted:

“I did not feel much anger or upset because I was expecting that [rejection]. Then, after the first and the second rejections, the fear and anxiety have disappeared and become normal. I was anxious. I was thinking of my luck. Will I get luck with my wife or not? Will I live a happy life? Also, I was realizing that my disability will be a cause of rejection. But, the fear has gone after the first and the second attempts.”

A Disabled Woman Does Not Seem To Be Beautiful

Sami rejects marrying a disabled woman because she would not be a woman " like ... like ... a real woman." Sami also believes that most disabled women “know this fact.” Asked what he meant by a “real woman,” Sami states, “I see them abnormal ... incomplete. They are not a woman for, for marriage, procreation, sexual pleasure, or work at home. They are physically different.” Sami has the same attitude about disabled men, however, he observes that being a disabled man is easier than being a disabled woman because men have choices about marriage. He refuses to marry a disabled woman because he does not see a disabled woman as fascinating or physically attractive:

“For me, a woman with a disability does not seem to be beautiful, seductive, or attractive. The non-disabled women are beautiful and charming. They give an aesthetic dimension that reflects the reality of women. There is a great pleasure while I am looking at her standing ... walking ... tying her skirt, or while she dances for me. Normal women are really, really different. Nobody, but I ... assume that. I assume that pregnancy is hard to a

disabled woman to handle it. Also, I don't think her uterus can carry the baby. I guess so. ... Maybe she can. I don't know. I just guess."

Jamal also refers to abnormality in his refusal to marry a disabled woman. He says that she had a near-invisible disability:

"When I saw her, I realized by my experience in the field of rehabilitation that she was abnormal. There was something, something abnormal while she was walking. Her legs were such distorted or have ... deformities though she was wearing a long dress. I diagnosed her she did not walk normally."

Jamal's heightened awareness of this woman's gait is indicative of the stigma he places on physical appearance. He says he is sure that the woman and her family realize that the rejection was because of her disability. Since he rejected her as a disabled man, Jamal believes he is not responsible for hurting the woman's feelings.

The participants admit that the visibility of impairment impacts their interest in disabled women because a disabled woman would make their own disability more visible and would increase people's stares. Digging, participants were asked whether they would marry a woman with an invisible impairment, such as mild hearing or vision loss.

Adam declares that he would never ever marry woman with a visible impairment. If he *had* to, he says he would marry a woman with a hearing impairment because it would be invisible or barely visible. Adam talks about the shame he felt when townspeople saw him with a disabled friend who has a "funny and strange" physical condition:

"He visited me here in my town. I live in a small town. It is a tiny and everybody knows each other. We went shopping, and everyone in the market was gazing at us. I felt so shamed and disgraced. I will not forget this situation. Until this moment, when I go to the same place, people ask me about him. In any event, such as wedding parties, some people still ask me about him and make fun of him because of his strange disability."

Adam reports that Jordanians are "intruders" who want to "trace everyone's lives" and investigate private matters. He is used to people's stares, yet he would not be able to handle the curiosity of people toward his life with a disabled wife.

Sami goes further saying that the more visible she is, the more physically severe her disability must be. He differentiates the visibility status as follow: "To be clear with you, I don't care if my wife has a visible disability but I don't [want] my wife to appear much visibly disabled." Since he associates visibility with the inability to do what a wife is expected to do, he does not want to marry a visibly disabled woman.

If I Married a Disabled Woman the Burden Would Be Double

Jordan is not broadly accessible to physically disabled people. Therefore, physical ability is required for conducting life's matters. While the participants are independent in their own

lives and receive minimal assistance, they want to marry non-disabled women who can assist them and their children. This is consistent with the woman's role in Jordanian culture, which is to take care of house, husband, and children. For instance, Adam does not pay attention to other criteria as much as his concern for having a woman who understands the details of married life with a physically disabled man. He believes that disabled women are as equal as non-disabled women yet he will not marry a disabled woman because:

“I still feel that I am a burden on my family and a burden on my brothers. They sometimes put on me the blankets when I sleep. They even warm up the car for me on cold days, besides to cooking, washing and shopping. So, if I married a disabled woman, the burden would be double. My family then will look after of both of us. I need a woman that has the physical ability to do the daily life. I want her cook, clean, buy for the house and so on. I want wife that might reduce my family’s burden not increase it. I don’t want her as a maid. No, I want her to achieve the balance.”

Sami states as fact that a disabled woman definitely would cause a burden. He wants a wife who has the ability to conduct her traditional role as a housewife:

“Giving birth and routine tasks as a wife and a housewife are other reasons. Women with disabilities are not suitable to perform the tasks of daily life as they cannot get pregnant and give birth. A disabled woman is not valid to give birth or to be a wife. She is not valid for a disabled or a non-disabled husband.”

As did the two previous participants, Jamal says that a disabled woman is not appropriate for marriage because married life is hard. It requires physical effort. A woman must be able to take care of children and a house, an expectation cited by Moghadam (2005) who writes that the woman is required to play the role of nurturer and supporter while the husband “plays the instrumental role of earning the family’s keep and maintaining discipline” (p. 138). Even if a disabled woman was able to fulfill her role now, Sami believes that she would not be able when she got older:

“Unlike men, tasks of women in life are biggest a thousand times more than the tasks of the man. I see the activities and actions made by my wife. They are unbearable. Actually my choice to marry a non- disabled woman was 100% right. If my wife was disabled, in the future, we would need a third person to serve me and her. So, I wanted have woman I can count on her in everything such as: shopping, raising children, following children, taking care of house, and life’s affairs.”

Sami reflects the same understanding. He believes he causes suffering for his family. His point of view about disability is that “the suffering is ... inherent in the disability. I was a financial, psychological, physical, and social suffering and burden.” Adam also believes that, consequently, a disabled woman would add suffering and be a burden on his family and on his life.

Sami was once told that his marriage choices were limited to disabled women. As a response, he chooses to marry a non-disabled woman.

“There is a story that happened to me years ago. An employee told me that ‘people who like you must marry a disabled woman.’ She hurt me. I did not know what to answer. She meant that being disabled means I did not have a right to have a normal woman as a wife. So, I decided to marry a normal woman because my marriage of a disabled woman would strengthen these convictions and beliefs.”

When asked for more details about what Sami means by “challenge” and in what ways he considers marriage to a “normal” woman a challenge, Sami answers with an insistent tone. Sami says, “I would like to tell them I was able to have one. People would be surprised when they found that I have done what they did not expect me to do.” Sami says that being with a “normal” wife would make him feel proud of himself:

“I challenge society, people's beliefs and everyone without exceptions. I want to answer every person and say that look to my wife. So, my marriage is a kind of ecstasy of victory, pride, and a reply to everyone. It is my weapon that I face the people with. And by which I can also overcome the physical barriers. But, if my wife had [a] disability, she would increase my disability.”

Jamal believes that if he married a disabled woman, he would always be doing things for her. He would be worried and anxious because she could not manage the home. He asks, “Why do I have to suffer while I can live in happiness?” and he says:

“In short the quality of life with non-disabled woman is better because the amount of suffering and fatigue is less and the amount of happiness is more. Now I do not suffer from anything and I feel relieved. My wife does all daily life tasks at home and takes care of my children. I feel less suffering and more happiness. I will not see medical devices in my face. I spend most of my life between medical devices. She doesn't need a medical device. No one will stare at us. We will not need assistance from outsiders. She helps me defeat the physical barriers. I really feel now my choice was great.”

People's attitudes receive considerable attention from the participants. Jamal refers to his public persona:

“When I go with her in a public place, wedding parties, visiting friends, or when we go to a restaurant, people begin to look at me in a positive way. I feel appreciated. But, if I had a disabled woman, I would have felt of people's pity toward us.”

Even though he is not married, Sami believes that people's attitudes would change for the better through marriage to a non-disabled woman because it would show his ability to marry an able-bodied woman:

“I would feel proud when I walk with her in public places. People will look at me and say to each other: look at that disabled man and how did he get this woman? How beautiful his wife is. It's kind of a challenge and self-proving...”

Adam expresses the same belief when he points out that a disabled woman would not bring pride. Rather, she attracts people's curiosity. He states that:

"Is it not enough that I have a disability? I cannot imagine myself with a disabled woman. And then people look at us. I cannot handle that. Seriously, a disabled woman as wife does not fit me. Imagine if a disabled woman is next to me, certainly because of her disability she will be eye-catching. I am totally certain that people when [they] see us will ... wonder and say how we live our life. How we cook and take care of our home."

Adam added that if his family found a disabled woman with "simple disabilities," he would not agree unless she had a "simple" hearing impairment or simple physical disabilities because her disability would not be visible and she would be physically able to manage the routine housewife tasks:

"People's attitudes prevent me from engaging with a disabled woman. People's eyes haunt me when I am out; I want to avoid people's deadly glances. Until this moment, I feel all people look at me. I'm even honest that I avoid being with other people with disabilities in a public place since I feel ashamed and embarrassed. My situation will be worse if my wife is also disabled. I am totally certain that people when they see us will ... wonder and say how we live our life. How we cook and take care of our home, wonder how we practice sex and how she becomes pregnant, or how she gives birth."

Blind Man Leads Cripple

Adam says, "The blind man leads cripple," which is a common Arabic adage meaning that the two are complementary to each other. The cripple can see and the blind man can walk so together they are able to do what needs to be done. To a degree, this adage speaks to the problem Shakespeare (2010) reports about the social model; that it ignores impairment. This adage points out the importance of physical support for people with impairments. Adam does not attribute his refusal to marry a disabled woman to her impairment but rather because she would not achieve the "physical balance" represented by this saying. Adam believes that marriage and life's requirements demand balance between the marriage partners. Adam says that he does not have any personal bias against disabled women but he wants to have a non-disabled wife so he can feel independent and avoid causing an "extra burden" on his family.

During the second interview, Adam says that he recently fell in love. He has concealed the affair for around 10 months and has just revealed this relationship proposing marriage. His marriage proposal was refused in the time between the second and third interviews. According to Adam, the woman's entire family accepts him with the exception of her father who does not approve because he is a "cripple." As is the tradition, the final word is the father's. Adam says he is depressed and angry during the third interview. He does not want to talk about this rejection but a few days later he agrees: "I will talk. I need to talk. Let the world see what happened to me."

"I found that I need to talk about it. I am very upset and I feel I am going to die. I need to talk. I am very upset because I always tried to avoid rejection. I have always dreamed of

marrying the one I love. The one I want. Unfortunately, when I got her, I was rejected by her father. For no reason... just because I am a cripple... because of our culture and customs which empower the father to make the decision and make her father refuse me. What do we do? Nothing... nothing.”

Adam has known the woman for a long time and they have loved and understood each other. Her mother and siblings have encouraged him and the next step is to ask his father. The mother tactfully conveys his marriage request to the father, gradually trying to show Adam's good points by saying, according to Adam:

“There is a very good groom, respectable, from a good family, with good financial status, educated, has a car, and [is] handsome. The father was very obsessed with this while he was hearing. The mother continued by saying he has a tiny problem. He has a physical disability.”

Once the father heard that Adam is disabled, he “went crazy” and Adam recounts the father's words:

“What is my daughter's fault to marry a disabled man? How and what will I say to my family and my tribe? The people for sure will think that my daughter is a bitch, or people will think that she dishonored the family and we wanted her to marry a crippled man to conceal the scandal. Are not there any people on the earth, but a cripple? What did my daughter do to marry him?”

Adam continues, saying:

“The father was very, very angry and did not want anyone to discuss this matter with him. He was very stubborn and he wanted to know why I chose his daughter. He wanted to know if we had any relationship. The mother hid that we were in love with each other and said that is as a traditional marriage request. Since he strongly rejected me, the daughter was not able to open her mouth. She could not even say a word. If he asked her, she would not say that she wanted me. She was very scared and pretended that she never met me.”

Adam says that after the rejection he has been disheartened and has felt oppressed and frustrated. He expresses anger, saying that he is not guilty of any wrong.

“I feel frustrated and oppressed. I do not eat or drink and I smoke too much. I lived a beautiful dream, but it turned into a nightmare. I have lived all my life waiting for this moment. I grew up hoping that I will choose my wife. I have dreamt of having the life I want with the one I want. After we agreed on every single detail of our lives and after we built our lives, the names of our children, the dream evaporates because of the beliefs, customs and traditions by a mere word of the father. *What is my fault? What is the guilt of my disability? What did I do to be refused?* We are now in the 21st century, and people still believe the same shit about disability. Anywhere I go I am rejected. I apply to work in the Gulf Countries and get the work and when they know that I am disabled they reject

me. I asked God, *why to create me with disability? Why am I?* I start to blaspheme, while I am waiting for the patience. I start to convert to atheism. I am much oppressed. *What was I guilty of?* Nothing. How long do I have to wait... I am no longer able. I am no longer able. Sorry, I was a little nervous, but it is really annoying..."

It Is a Normal Contradiction

The participants report accusations of being contradictory or arrogant because they will not marry a disabled woman and the men do not disagree with this claim. Sami and Jamal say that their perspective is, indeed, a clear contradiction while Jamal considers it a "vague and understandable contradiction." Sami divulges that this contradiction is normal and justified, while Adam believes this attitude is not contradictory. He attributes it to the need for balance. Adam argues that balance allows the marriage partners to maintain their gender roles, a position well documented in the literature. He says:

"It is a balance. This is not because she does not enjoy mental abilities. It is a physical balance between people with disabilities and non-disabled people to achieve the integration and exchange of life's roles. If we were both disabled, we would be a burden on our family."

Adam finds that the inaccessibility of the environment constrains him so that out of necessity he *must* marry an able-bodied woman. He says he values disabled women and that he does not discriminate against disabled women or contradict himself. He believes disabled women are equal to other people and are able to marry either able-bodied or disabled men and have children.

In contrast, Sami considers his refusal to marry a disabled woman a contradiction but he sees it as normal and justified. According to Sami, his destiny as a man gives him the freedom to choose whomever he wants:

"But it is normal contradiction because I am not unjust. This is my and her fate. I am not responsible for this situation. It is our fate. I'm looking for the best, and women with disabilities are not better than non-disabled. Frankly, all normal people are better than disabled males or females. We are entirely different."

Sami says he is not the oppressor and, therefore, he is not responsible for this contradiction:

"This is my fate to be a man and have the right to choose. If she had the choice, I do not think she would marry a disabled man. So are the things. I know I am oppressed like her, but her life is more unjust for her because she is female. So are the things."

Jamal admitted to an inner contradiction yet he sees it as a contradiction that he does not understand:

"Is it ego? If it is ego then it will be my own decision. But, all individuals with disabilities do not want to marry disabled women. *Am I selfish?* Again everyone would

be selfish, too. I do not think selfish is the reason. There is something inside me. I do not understand what it is and I would love to know what it is. I did not understand why I did not want to have disabled woman even though I have been refused many times by non-disabled woman. There was something preventing me.”

Jamal never thought of a disabled woman as a wife and he refers to disabled women as “sinless and innocent.”

“I sympathize with all disabled women. I feel sorry for them. I feel sadness for the disabled women. Believe me or not when I hear about a disabled who will marry someone with or without disability, I feel very, very exultant. I often imagine myself a disabled woman and ask myself: *what is my fault that no one accepts to marry me?*”

Oppression Is Everywhere

Participants vividly describe their sense of hyper-visibility and stigmatization, both of which are related to tribal beliefs about normalcy, honor, and social standing (Gharibeh, 2009). Internalized oppression clearly is illustrated by what all three participants have to say about themselves and disabled women, and the decisions they have made about marriage. While they view themselves as oppressed and stigmatized and agree that disabled women share a similar social status, they realize that disabled Jordanian women experience stigma layered over stigma. The men seem to have fallen prey to what Charlton (2010) refers to as alienation, a form of disability oppression that divides people and isolates individuals, and which Foucault (1982) refers to as a dividing practice.

The participants’ “defensive othering” (Schwalbe, et al., 2000) reproduces the oppression they complain about yet they distance themselves from this, as does Sami below, by implicating society. Throughout the interviews, participants describe themselves as shameful and burdensome and they turn against disabled women by refusing to consider them marriageable. Sami vividly explains it similarly when he absolves himself of the oppression of disabled women in the following excerpt:

“I don’t hurt the disabled woman’s feelings when I don’t marry her. I am not oppressive. I don’t hurt anyone. That is her fate and she must handle it. When I had disability, it was my fate, too and I adjusted with it. I will not blame anyone, if a woman or her family refuses me. So, nobody can blame me. Also, I want to say something, Where was the society when I was marginalized? Where was the society when I got fired from my work? I am not oppressive. Oppression is everywhere.”

Earlier we took a tentative stance on the social model and we recognized its problem in relation to impairment. Our participants’ lives serve as examples of the tensions inherent in the social model when it comes to impairment. They illustrate the importance of practical considerations when it comes to their physical functioning. It is essential to understand the participants as situated within broad cultural contexts as well as their own internalized oppression. They live in a conservative tribal society in a poor country in which the family is the central social structure responsible for providing care and support for its disabled members.

Without parents, siblings, or a wife to provide necessary physical assistance, the men face significant barriers to fulfilling their traditional role as husband, father, and provider.

On the other hand, they consider disability a shameful burden that causes people to stare and intrude on their privacy. They long for “real women,” because beauty exists only in normality. They reject disabled women as marriage partners and absolve themselves of any guilt while blaming society, as does Sami when he asks, “Where was society when I was marginalized?”

Salam Jalal, EDD recently finished his dissertation in the United States and is returning to Jordan to continue working to improve the lives of disabled people.

Susan L. Gabel, PhD is a professor and the director of the PhD in education program in the College of Educational Studies at Chapman University. Her areas of research include: global issues in disability studies, intellectual and developmental disability, and inclusive education.

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